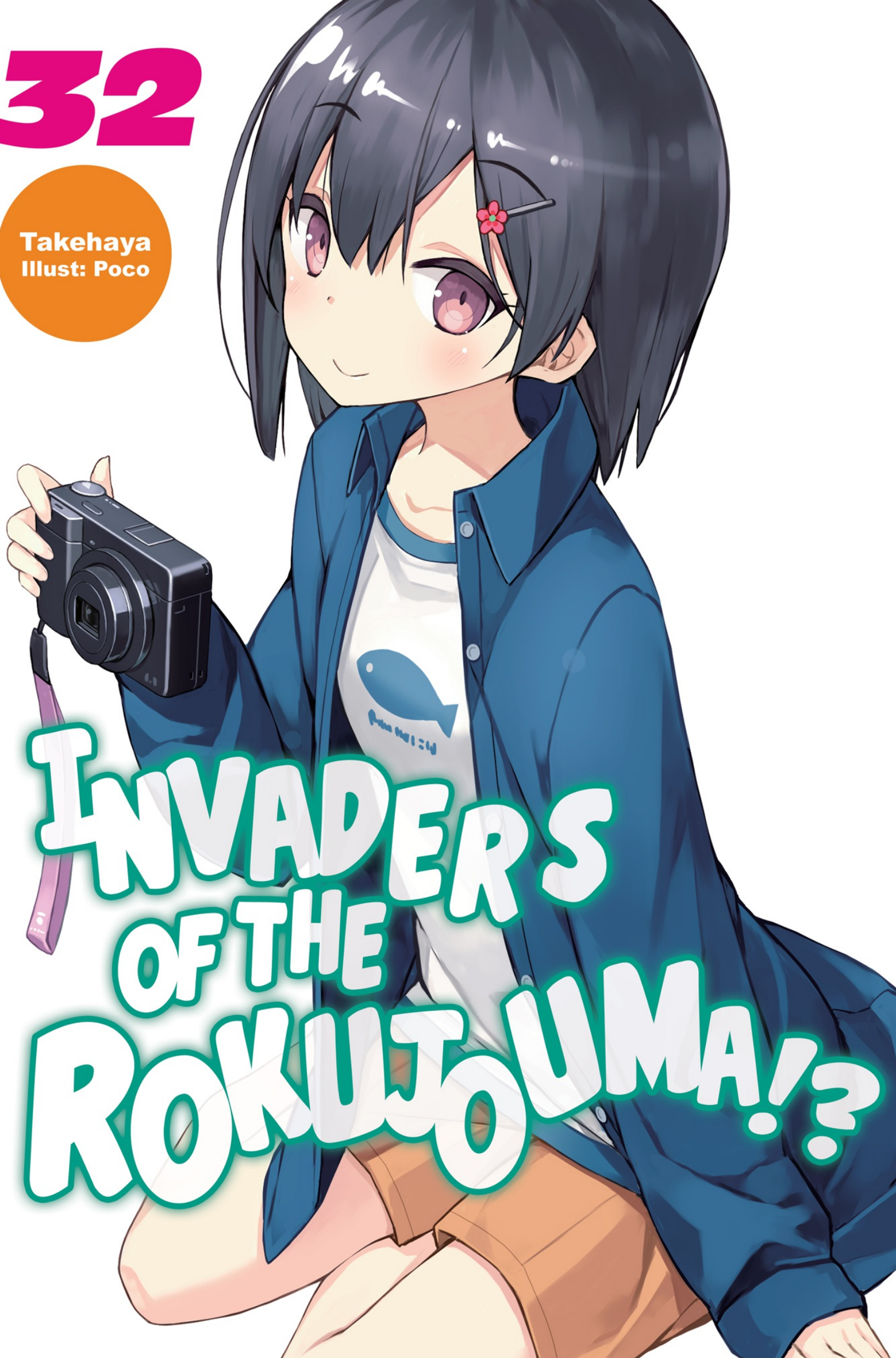


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Takehaya
Illust: Poco



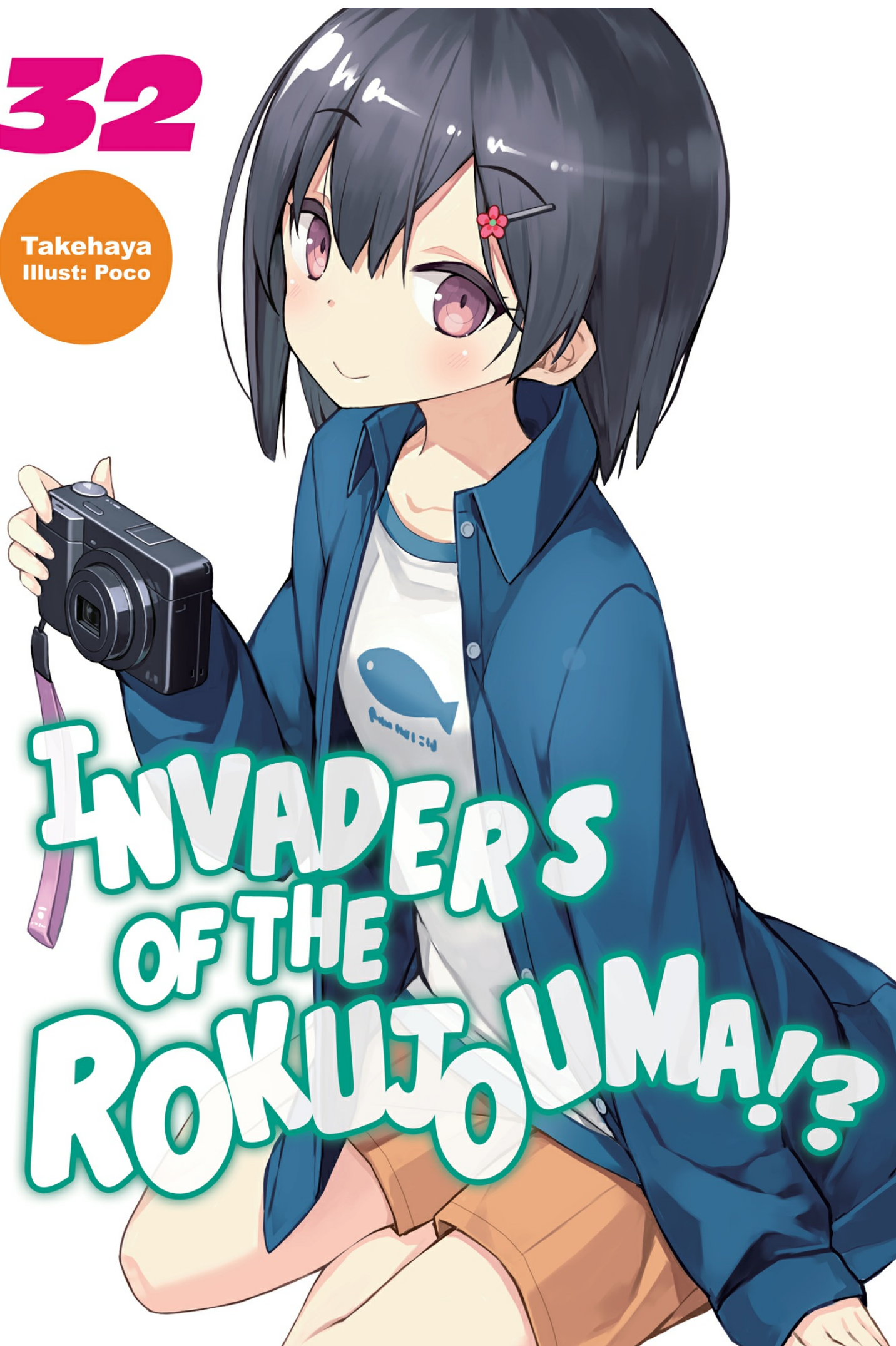
INVADERS OF THE ROKUTOU MA!?

VISIT...

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32

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



A NEW NEIGHBOR
IN ROOM 105!







**“THIS
FACTORY IS
BEING USED AS A
FRONT FOR THE
PROFESSOR’S
RESEARCH!”**

**“WAAAAAH! DON’T
TELL ME I’VE BEEN
WORKING FOR
NOTHING AGAIN!”**

**YURIKA’S
GOT
ANOTHER
SHADY
JOB?!**

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FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.



UNDERGROUND DWELLERS (OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106. Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.



KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS (OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.



CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE

Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.

PRINCESS ALAIA



SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.



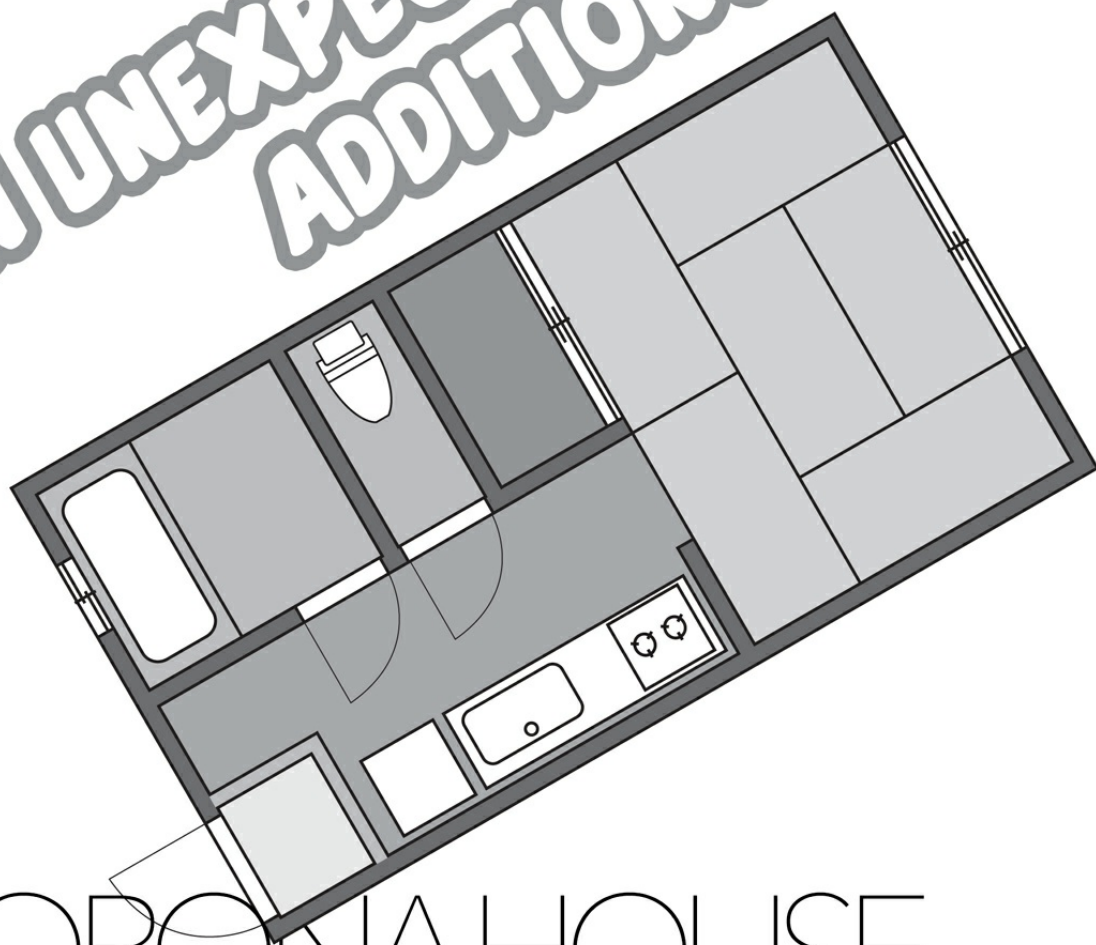
NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

AN UNEXPECTED
ADDITION?



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Nalfa's Big Move

Friday, April 29th

Nalfa was wearing a particularly bright expression this day, which would ordinarily be unthinkable considering she was in the middle of moving for the second time in the past month. The dorm for Forthorthian transfer students was currently unusable because of the spy devices that had been found inside, meaning Nalfa needed a temporary relocation. It was a rare sight indeed for someone to be happy about being forced to move, but Nalfa was over the moon. The reason? She wasn't moving just anywhere...

"Nalfa-san, is it all right if I open up this cardboard box?"

"N-N-No, Koutarou-sama! I'd just die! That box is full of my undergarments!"

"It's cool. I get it. No girl would want a guy she didn't really know seeing her —"

"That's not what I meant! If I had the Blue Knight do something so trivial for me, all of Forthorthe would condemn me!"

"...Would they really?"

"They really would!"

"Okay... Then I'll just put it down by the closet."

"Please do!"

Nalfa, you see, was moving in to Corona House room 105, the apartment next to Koutarou's. A university student had been living there previously, but he'd graduated earlier in the spring and had moved away to attend graduate school. Shizuka had been planning on renting the vacant apartment out to a new tenant, but as formal diplomatic relationships between Japan and Forthorthe were just being established, she decided to rent it out to Theia and the others. She was hesitant to rent the room out to a stranger considering the circumstances, and she knew she wouldn't have to worry about Theia and the

others bothering the neighbors or anything. And with the apartment available, it was an easy first choice for housing Nalfa when she suddenly needed somewhere to move. There could be nowhere safer, so they wouldn't even have to take any extra security precautions. It was win-win-win.

Nalfa, of course, had no objections to this plan. In fact, she welcomed it. She was perfectly content to be living next door to a princess and sleeping just one room over from the legendary Blue Knight. It was any Forthorthian girl's dream.

"Let's see... I'll just put it down right around here."

Fwump!

"Say, Kotori..." Nalfa leaned over and whispered as she watched Koutarou put down the box he was carrying. "Koutarou-sama doesn't really seem to get that he's, like, a galactic celebrity, you know?"

"I mean... I can't say I really *get* it either. I know Kou-niisan is some famous hero, but even after seeing him fight, I'm still having trouble thinking of him that way."

Nalfa's biggest problem moving in to Corona House was Koutarou himself. He seemed practically oblivious to his own social position, and he was frequently doing and saying things that caught Nalfa completely off guard. Every time it happened, she thought her heart was going to stop... But more often than not, it was just Koutarou being courteous—like with the box earlier—so she couldn't even be mad at him about it if she wanted to. It was just so hard to see and think about a legendary hero in his everyday life.

"I think that's understandable. You found out so suddenly, after all, Kotori."

"Yeah, but I can tell how famous he is from how you behave around him, Nalfa-chan..." Kotori said with a wry smile and a shrug.

In reality, she was the one having the hardest time coming to terms with Koutarou's identity. She hadn't fought alongside him like Theia and the other girls had, and she'd never seen his scars like Kenji had. She had no clue and no context... Learning that Koutarou was a hero in a far-off galaxy came as a bolt out of the blue. She could barely even imagine it, so it would be some time yet before she actually came to terms with it. Even after seeing him fight and

hearing the whole story, it was the best she could do to try to think of Koutarou as some secret celebrity. First and foremost, he was “Kou-niisan” in her eyes.

“Saying he’s famous is kind of an understatement. He’s a fundamental part of every Forthorthian’s—”

“Oh no! Nalfa-chan, look out!”

That was when Nalfa, who’d gotten distracted by her discussion with Kotori, tripped over her luggage.

“Huwah?!”

Unable to respond to the unexpected accident, Nalfa’s expression froze up as she tumbled towards some unpacked tableware. She was falling head first, and the tableware consisted mostly of glass and porcelain pieces. Worse yet, she couldn’t brace herself because of a cardboard box in the way. At this rate, she was seriously going to injure herself.

“Nalfa-san!”

But that’s when Koutarou came flying. He’d been keeping an eye on Nalfa throughout the moving process, and he dropped what he was doing to come to her aid, managing to catch her just before she crashed into the tableware.

“Argh, sorry, Landlord-san!”

But the trouble wasn’t over yet. Koutarou had caught Nalfa, but rather than stopping her, he was now tumbling with her and her diverted momentum. Quickly realizing that crashing into anything like this would be dangerous, Koutarou spun his body around to shield Nalfa.

Wham!

“Kyah!”

“Ugh!”

With a loud thud, Koutarou and Nalfa crashed right into the wall of room 105. Koutarou took most of the impact since he’d forcibly positioned himself between Nalfa and the wall, but the both of them collapsed to the ground.

“Kou-niisan! Nalfa-chan!”

Dust and plaster showered down on them as a gaping hole opened up in the wall. Their combined weight was well over a hundred kilograms, and the impact of their little crash was serious. The hole led right into room 106, and the girls standing on the other side of the wall in Koutarou's apartment stared right through it with wide eyes.

"Owowow..."

It was quite the accident, but fortunately Nalfa wasn't seriously hurt. She was aching all over, but she could move just fine and didn't appear to be bleeding anywhere. She grimaced as she picked herself up.

"Kuh... I'm glad I made it in time..."

Koutarou, however, was still on the ground. Taking the brunt of the impact had knocked the wind out of him and he still hadn't recovered. It was all he could do to sigh upon seeing Nalfa safe.

"L-Layous-sama! Are you okay?!"

Seeing Koutarou's condition, Nalfa cried out and clung to him.

"Are you, Nalfa-san?"

"Who cares about me?! Are you hurt, Layous-sama?!"

The Blue Knight had ended up like this because of her carelessness. As a proud Forthorthian citizen, that was unacceptable to her. In her panic, she started calling him "Layous-sama" instead of "Koutarou-sama."

"I-I'm fine, and more importantly... I care about you."

Koutarou was finally starting to pull himself together. He was aching and his breathing was ragged, but he lifted himself up off the floor.

"Are you hurt, Nalfa-san?"

"I, um..."

That was the first Nalfa's thoughts turned to herself. She'd only been concerned about Koutarou.

"I'm okay. Just a little scratched. But are you sure you're all right, Layous-sama?"

Nalfa was fine thanks to Koutarou. She was a little scraped up, but that was all. That was why she was so focused on Koutarou. Just the thought that he might've gotten hurt for her sake made her anxious.

"I'm okay. I'm sturdier than you are. You guys all worry too much."

Fortunately, however, Koutarou was just fine. He'd gotten the wind knocked out of him good and well, but it would take more than that and a few scratches to stop Koutarou. Not only was he used to playing rough sports, he was constantly protected by layers of magic and psychic power.

"Thank goodness..."

Relief washed over Nalfa when she realized Koutarou was okay. She didn't know what she would have done if she'd gotten him seriously hurt, so she thanked her lucky stars he was all right. Thankful tears welled in her eyes.

"Still, this is pretty awful..." Koutarou muttered.

While he and Nalfa were fine, there had still been a casualty—the wall between rooms 105 and 106. The hole they'd knocked in it was easily big enough for a person to pass through.

"Landlord-san is going to kill me... She treasures Corona House more than anything."

The image of a demonic-looking Shizuka flashed through Koutarou's mind. Corona House was all her late parents had left her, so it was very special to her. There was no way she wasn't going to lose her mind when she saw the gaping hole in the wall. Knowing that, Koutarou braced himself for the beating he was soon to receive.

"I'm sorry, Layous-sama. This is all my fault..."

"I'd much prefer this to you getting hurt."

"Thank you very much, Lay— Er, Koutarou-sama."

"What about me? I'm covered in all this white stuff..." interjected a sniffing Yurika.



“Sorry about that, Yurika.”

“Well, it sounds like it was for Nalfa-chan’s sake, so it’s fine...”

“I’m very sorry, Yurika-sama...”

The real fallout from the hole in the wall had landed on Yurika—literally. She was heavily dusted with drywall and plaster. She wasn’t hurt, but she was crying nonetheless. Her freshly-opened pudding cup, you see, was now powdered too.

Shizuka ran over as soon as she heard the commotion, and a demonic look flashed in her eyes as she beheld the disaster in front of her. Koutarou knew she’d be mad, so with little other option, he resigned himself to death and prostrated himself before Shizuka to explain the situation.

“I’m sorry. You’re right to be mad, so I won’t make any excuses.”

But that’s when she said something unexpected...

“I forgive you.”

Not believing his own ears, a stupefied Koutarou looked up at Shizuka.

“What?”

“I said I forgive you.”

“Y-You do?”

“What else am I supposed to do? As bad as this is, it’s better than Nalfa-chan getting hurt. If I told you I wished that had happened instead, my parents would never forgive me. You did the right thing, Satomi-kun.”

“Landlord-san...”

“Besides, I’m sure a boy I know will do something to make it up to me later, hmm?”

“Yeah... I’m sure he will.”

“So we’re good.”

It was Koutarou’s lucky day; Shizuka didn’t actually kill him. In fact, she instantly forgave him with a smile on her face. His wallet would take a hit later, but that was far better than Shizuka losing herself in rage. And so, with that

resolved, Koutarou set about cleaning up after the incident.

The first order of business was treating Nalfa, who had scraped her arm in the tumble. While Koutarou was pleading his case to Shizuka, Nalfa had gone to wash up. And now, after looking over the freshly-cleaned wound, Koutarou pulled out his first aid kit.

“Did you wash your scrape?”

“Yes, I made sure to clean the wound.”

“Good. Now let me see it.”

“Here.”

“I’m sorry about this, Koutarou-sama.”

“What are you talking about? You got hurt, so you get first aid. It’s that simple.”

“That may be... but my carelessness has caused you so much trouble...”

“You’re still just not used to life here. You’ll get the hang of things over time.”

“Thank you, Koutarou-sama...”

As of late, Koutarou had begun carrying a miniature first aid kit in his pocket. It was far more convenient than having to go get the real thing every time Nalfa hurt herself. Presently, he pulled an antiseptic spray from the small kit and applied it to Nalfa’s scrape in an accustomed fashion. This was practically routine by now.

Auuugh, I’m having His Excellency the Blue Knight act as a paramedic... This won’t do! As a Forthorthian, I should be ashamed of myself...

Nalfa was embarrassed of the burden she placed on Koutarou, but he seemed to pay it no mind. He was far more intent on seeing her wounds treated.

“Here, Satomi-kun.”

After putting some gauze on Nalfa’s arm, Koutarou was just about to reach for a bandage when someone suddenly held one out to him.

“Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Heehee... You’re very welcome.”

It was, of course, none other than Harumi’s doing. She was a considerate girl and often played nurse when Koutarou was treating Nalfa. Today was no different, and Harumi smiled brightly as she handed Koutarou the bandage.

“Oh?”

When Koutarou went to take it from her, his eyes fell on Harumi’s hand. She had a blue ribbon trimmed with white lace tied neatly around her right wrist.

“What is it, Satomi-kun?”

“I just noticed your ribbon.”

“Oh, you mean this?”

Once Harumi handed over the bandage, she held her free hand up and giggled bashfully as she glanced at the ribbon in question.

“Actually, I had a wonderful dream the other night... I was thinking it would be nice if something similar happened in real life, so I copied an idea from it.”

“So it’s sort of like a good luck charm?”

That was just like Harumi... Or so Koutarou thought as he went about bandaging Nalfa’s right forearm. When he reached her wrist, he stared at it blankly for a moment.

Bandages... Bandages and ribbons...? Did something like this happen before...? No, I can’t remember anything like it...

His eyes flipped back and forth between the girls’ wrists. Something about this felt familiar, but no matter how he racked his brain, he couldn’t recall a thing. Coming to the conclusion that it must be his imagination, he shrugged it off.

“So you finally noticed, you fool.”

Suddenly, a familiar face occupied Koutarou’s field of vision. Her golden hair bouncing everywhere, Theia looked up at him with pouting blue eyes and puffed-up cheeks.

“Mackenzie noticed everything last week.”

As she spoke, the unhappy Theia jabbed her finger against Koutarou's nose. It was her way of punishing the thoughtless boy.

"Everything?"

Koutarou looked down his near-flat nose at Theia, whose choice of words had gotten his attention. Seeing this, Theia held up something.

"Harumi's not the only one with something new, you know."

In her hand, Theia was holding the handlebars to a bicycle. She'd removed them so she could better adjust them for her height... but Koutarou had no recollection of Theia having a bike. It must be new.

"So Sakuraba-senpai got a ribbon and Theia got a bike..."

There, Koutarou took a look around the room. Looking at the girls in turn, he realized that they each seemed to have something new. Maki had headphones with a feline design to them hanging around her neck. Yurika had a pair of sneakers that she was gleefully staring at, apparently having just taken them out of the box. Shizuka had a new apron, and when her eyes met Koutarou's, she spread it out for him to see. Sanae spun around to show off the winged backpack she was wearing. Ruth was in a cute new outfit, and she blushed when she saw Koutarou studying her in it. Kiriha donned a new hair accessory, and she'd made some minor alterations to her hairstyle and outfit to match. And last but not least, Clan was lovingly polishing a vacuum tube—the kind an old radio would use.

"When did you all...?"

"Jeez, you could stand to learn a thing or two from Mackenzie!"

"Hey, I'm not like him. But, really, what brought this on? I'm seeing it now. You all seem to have something new."

"They're all good luck charms, just like Harumi's ribbon. We're third-years now, but our futures are uncertain. After seeing Harumi take the initiative, we all decided to give it a try too."

"Huh..."

Even though they all had something new to show off, their new belongings

suited them all perfectly. That was why Koutarou hadn't noticed them before. Nothing seemed out of place. It was easy enough to believe, then, that the girls had picked them out for themselves as good luck charms. Koutarou was superstitious whenever he had a ballgame coming up, so he got the idea.

But what's with this feeling...?

There was just one thing that bothered him. He felt the same strange familiarity about the girls' new belongings that he had about Harumi's ribbon. They were grabbing his attention, but he didn't know why. He didn't hate the feeling, however. In the end, he decided just to put it in the back of his mind for now. He'd figure it out someday.

"A good luck charm... That might be exactly what I need too."

Nalfa looked at the other girls as Koutarou did... then at the gaping hole in the wall. Her shoulders slumped with a sigh. She wanted to decrease the number of accidents and injuries that her carelessness caused. If she didn't, she'd just keep causing trouble for Koutarou. She was willing to do anything it took, even if it meant getting superstitious.

"Don't worry, Nalfa-chan! I'm sure you'll be fine once you get used to life here!" Kotori said cheerfully as she hung some curtains up over the hole in the wall.

Hearing her best friend's encouragement, Nalfa's spirits began to lift.

"I hope so..."

"Don't worry!"

"Yeah, you're right... I'll do my best!"

"That's the spirit!"

There, a smile returned to Nalfa's face. In the end, she might not need a good luck charm as long as she had Kotori. She was so very happy they'd become friends.

Once he was done tending to Nalfa, Koutarou got back to helping her move. With the hole in the wall, he and the girls could go back and forth between the

apartments freely, which actually sped things up. It wasn't long before room 105 was in livable condition.

"Here, Yurika. This is for you."

"Are you sure?! That's your pudding, Satomi-san!"

"You helped with the move even after what happened to you. I can't let that go unrewarded."

"Thank you for the tasty treat!"

With the move mostly over now, the group was in the middle of a tea break in room 106. Everyone was sipping on tea and nibbling on rice crackers, except for Yurika who was indulging in the pudding she'd gotten from Koutarou. It was an apology after what had happened to hers.

"Yurika, gimme some too!" Sanae begged.

"Just a little, okay?" Yurika offered.

"Mmm, that's good!"

"Yeah, this is much better than the one powdered with plaster."

"You ate that?!"

Koutarou chewed on a rice cracker as he contentedly watched Yurika enjoy her pudding. When he took a sip of tea next, his eyes met Shizuka's.

"You're being awfully nice, Satomi-kun," she said from the other side of the table.

"Well, it was my fault."

"I know. And you're being *awfully* nice about it, Satomi-kun," Shizuka repeated with a slightly different inflection as she tapped her shoulders.

"All right, all right..."

Realizing what she wanted, Koutarou got up and moved around behind Shizuka so that he could rub her shoulders.

"How's that?"

"Can you go a little stronger? My shoulders are so stiff after having to bend at

a strange angle to clean up.”

“You got it.”

“Ah, that’s better. Keep it up, Satomi-kun.”

“I’ll pour my heart and soul into it.”

“Very good.”

Yurika wasn’t the only one Koutarou owed an apology. And after damaging her only keepsake from her parents, he knew a pudding cup wasn’t going to cut it with Shizuka. Koutarou had been on his best behavior with her since the incident, which fortunately seemed to be pleasing her. Her demands hadn’t escalated much, but she certainly seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Koutarou-sama is rubbing her shoulders...”

This was all a strange and wondrous sight to Nalfa. She was so taken by surprise that she didn’t even think to record it with her camera. She simply stared at them wide-eyed.

“Shizuka-san has known Kou-niisan since before he became the Blue Knight, so they’re like close friends.”

“That may be... But I still feel like I should be the one rubbing her shoulders.”

Koutarou may have busted the wall, but it was for Nalfa’s sake. She believed any punishment that came about from it should fall squarely on her.

“That’s the tricky thing about matters of the heart,” Kiriha chimed in as if to answer Nalfa’s doubts. She set her cup down on the table and tossed a smile her way. “This isn’t so much a punishment as it is the two of them playing.”

“Playing?”

“Indeed. Didn’t you play around with your brother the same way?”

“Well, yes... But those two aren’t siblings.”

“Certainly not. But so much has happened between them that it’s hard to say they aren’t family.”

“So it’s sort of like how it is with the princesses?”

“Yes. This is just a way of affirming their bond. Of course... Koutarou wouldn’t admit that.”

With a wry smile, Kiriha took another sip of tea and turned her eyes towards Koutarou and Shizuka. To Nalfa, it certainly looked like she was beholding family... Or perhaps something even more dear.

Maybe this is like that soulmates thing Kotori is always talking about? But... it’s different for me. He’s... He’s a hero.

Nalfa looked from Kiriha to Koutarou, and as she did, she realized that she was looking at him differently from the other girls. She beheld him as a hero. That should have been enough for her, but somehow she couldn’t help thinking it was a shame.

“If it bothers you so, Nalfa, then why don’t you help?”

“What?”

“There’s no rule that says you can’t join in. But only if you want to, that is.”

“I...”

Kiriha’s words made Nalfa question herself. Did she want to join in? How *did* she want to see Koutarou?

“I’m... going to go help Koutarou-sama a little.”

That was the choice she made in the end, though she still wasn’t certain if her feelings were for Koutarou or the hero known as the Blue Knight. Either way, however, she was sure that doing nothing would only work against her.

“I see,” Kiriha replied briefly with a smile and a nod.

There, Nalfa quietly made her way over to Koutarou and timidly called out to the group. After a short exchange, she joined Koutarou and helped rub Shizuka’s shoulders.

Just what does Nalfa Laren mean for us?

Kiriha had urged Nalfa to join in because she believed it would be good for the transfer student so far from home, but that wasn’t her only reason. During the battle the other day, she’d witnessed Nalfa exhibit some kind of power that

Nalfa herself seemed to be unaware of. Things had ended up working out, but there was no guarantee that would be the case next time. That inspired a desire in Kiriha to figure out just who Nalfa really was.

She seems to be an average transfer student, but it would be rash to assume that she has that power by coincidence. Was she sent here by someone? Or perhaps it has something to do with our missing memories... I'll need to observe her further.

According to the letter Kiriha had left herself, she and the others were missing a portion of their memories between April 5th and 6th. Kiriha suspected that Nalfa might have something to do with it, but it was only a suspicion. She had no conclusive evidence to go on, so she would continue to wait and watch.

“Welp!”

That was when Yurika, who’d finished off her pudding, suddenly stood up. When she did, all eyes fell on her.

“What’s up, Yurika?”

Koutarou called out to her on behalf of the group, and she answered with a cheerful smile.

“It’s time for my part-time job, so I’m going out for a bit.”

Yurika had a shift scheduled for this evening. Her latest manga binge had put her over budget.

“Another part-time job? Where is it this time?” Maki asked worriedly.

She wasn’t the only one alarmed to hear Yurika had another part-time job, however. Everyone was, and rightfully so. Yurika’s last job, after all, had been as a yakuza henchman.

“Don’t worry. I’ve had plenty of time to reflect on my actions. This time, I’ll be polishing glass panes at an old factory.”

Yurika had learned her lesson after letting greed blind her into becoming a crime syndicate underling. Instead of jumping at sketchy job offers, she’d carefully selected one at a local factory this time.

“I see. Good luck.”

“Thank you, Maki-chan! I’m off!”

It was hard to imagine a local factory being a criminal front, so Maki was able to see Yurika off with a smile.

“After all this time, she’s finally started properly thinking for herself.”

“Master, Yurika-sama is a magical girl of justice. Surely she’s realized she has no business being an agent of evil.”

“You’re not being very honest, Veltlion. You gave her that pudding because you think she’s been doing well lately, didn’t you?”

“That’s not true. I was just thinking that I’ve had too much sugar lately.”

“Then can I have your dessert tomorrow?”

“No way, Sanae. That one’s mine.”

“Whaaat? Didn’t you just say you’ve had too much sugar lately?”

“Jeez, you really aren’t being honest...”

The atmosphere in the room grew warm and fuzzy. Just like the other girls, Yurika had grown over the past two years. Her friends were all happy to see it, and the girls couldn’t help thinking it was a shame that Koutarou was the only one who had trouble showing it. In that sense, he hadn’t grown at all.

The Club Obstacle Marathon

Monday, May 2nd

As the calendar turned to May, things began heating up around Kisshouharukaze High School. The sports festival was right around the corner, after all. Set to take place in the middle of May, it was a big event for all of Harukaze High. There was already excitement in the air as students bustled all over campus with various preparations. Things were just as lively as they were before the cultural festival in the fall.

“What’s a sports festival?”

There was one student, however, who didn’t seem to understand what all the fuss was about. It was the new transfer student from Forthorthe, Nalfa Laren. She was currently on her way to the photography club and had noticed a sports festival poster on the bulletin board in the hallway. Since she was unfamiliar with the concept, she turned to her friend Kotori for an explanation.

“Well, let’s see... Simply put, it’s a day for everyone to get outside and play.”

“What do you play?”

“First, everyone splits into teams. It seems this year there are going to be two teams school-wide: the red team and the white team. Those two teams will compete through various games and events that get everyone moving around. It’s like a field day.”

“That sounds like fun! I would love to participate!”

As she gleaned the nature of the sports festival from Kotori’s explanation, Nalfa’s eyes sparkled with delight. Forthorthian schools practiced something similar, though the Forthorthian version tended to focus purely on athletics. The idea of incorporating games and special events into it captivated Nalfa, and she saw ahead of her a golden opportunity for getting some choice coverage.

“So, Kotori, what’s the most popular event?”

Not one to let a golden opportunity slip past her, Nalfa got to work right away. She pulled out her camera and began rolling as she asked Kotori more about the sports festival.

“Nii-san said that it’s the club obstacle marathon.”

Kotori had gotten used to Nalfa filming her like this, so she was now comfortable in front of the camera and could answer Nalfa’s questions calmly. Incidentally, although completely unbeknownst to her, Kotori was steadily gaining popularity in Forthorthe. That was in part due to her cute face and warm personality, but it was also because she was Koutarou’s childhood friend. Her talk of “Kou-niisan” was a valuable source of biographical information on the Blue Knight.

“And what kind of event is that?”

“You know that clubs are a big deal at this school, right?”

“Yes. I often see them working hard around campus.”

There, Nalfa turned her camera to the window. Just outside were several different sports teams in the middle of their respective practices.

“Well, the obstacle marathon is a chance for the clubs to compete against one another. As the name suggests, it’s a marathon that’s dotted with obstacles along the way. The obstacles are challenges the competitors have to complete, like solving math problems or walking on stilts.”

“So it won’t be a competition between the red and white teams you mentioned earlier?”

“That’s right. The club obstacle marathon is special because it’s the only event where those teams don’t matter. It’s sort of like a way for the clubs to drum up support and hopefully get some new members. That’s why standing out is everyone’s main goal—there are even clubs that compete without any intention of winning.”

“Do you think it’s going to be a fierce fight between the clubs this year?”

“I think so. I hear the spotlight will be on the liberal arts clubs and societies for the first half, and on the athletic clubs and sports teams for the second

half.”

“By the way, will Koutarou-sama be participating?”

“Probably. Two years ago, the knitting society that Kou-niisan belongs to won the marathon.”

“That’s wonderful!”

Now that she had more details on the event, Nalfa excitedly began photographing sports festival posters and materials. She wouldn’t include them in her video, but they would be useful for reference.

“Oh? What are you two doing over here?”

While Nalfa was wrapping up her impromptu photoshoot, Sanae came strolling by. Seeing Nalfa and Kotori standing around in the hall caught her attention, so she approached the two girls to see what they were up to.

“Hello, Sanae-sama.”

“Oh, we were just looking at the bulletin board.”

“The bulletin board, huh? What do we have here?”

Sanae peered over and looked at the poster Kotori was pointing to. When she saw what it was for, her eyes began sparkling.

“Wow, the sports festival? I can’t believe it’s already that time of year again!”

As a fan of all things fun, Sanae adored the sports festival. Realizing it was soon upon them, she was instantly beaming and full of energy. She whipped right around and wildly waved her hand.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! Come over here!”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Beckoned by Sanae, Koutarou walked over with the other girls in tow. They’d actually been called to the school office and were on their way there, but figured a little detour wouldn’t hurt.

“Check it out!”

“The sports festival, huh? So much has happened that I had completely

forgotten about it...”

“This takes me back,” added Theia. “I still remember the obstacle marathon like it was yesterday.”

“That was back when I was helping Koutarou as his guardian angel!” shouted Sanae.

“Kiriha and I had a fierce battle that day. What an uproar it caused.”

“That’s because you planted a bunch of landmines!”

“Youthful indiscretion! There’s no reason to dredge that up now!”

“Yes, yes. Of course, Your Highness.”

“Not so fast!” interjected Shizuka. “Those landmines gave me the worst hair day *ever*! It was horrible!”

“It’s already been two years, Theia-dono...” mused Kiriha. “Thanks to all our scheming, we both ended up collapsing, which allowed Yurika and Harumi to take the win.”

“I still see Yurika-sama polishing her trophy from time to time,” added Ruth.

“It’s the only trophy I have!”

With all this talk of the sports festival, Koutarou and the girls began waxing nostalgic. Two years ago, the invaders had only just arrived in room 106. They still considered each other adversaries and used the obstacle marathon as a way to compete for ownership of the apartment. Memories of that time were fresh in their minds even now. They all felt silly looking back on it, but there was no doubt that it had strengthened the bonds between them.

“May, huh? That was before I came here...”

“That’s right, Maki,” said Clan. “You showed up not long after I did, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Just after the first play.”

“A whole half a year passed by without us...”

Clan and Maki were the only two that found themselves isolated from the conversation. Since they hadn’t arrived until after the sports festival, they

hadn't participated in it with everyone else. The same was true for Kotori and Nalfa, but Clan and Maki had been with the group for so long that it made them feel rather left out not to be able to reminisce with everyone.

I see that look on Clan and Maki's faces every now and then... I guess their late arrivals and their pasts still bother them.

After thinking things over for a moment, Koutarou loudly declared...

"Let's all take part this year too!"

Koutarou wasn't the type to look the other way. If Clan and Maki weren't part of the memories they all shared together, they'd just have to make more. And the fastest way to do that right now was to jump into the sports festival again.

"Really, Satomi-kun?!" Maki exclaimed, her eyes alight.

She figured Koutarou wanted to participate both because of his love for athletics and out of consideration for her and Clan. And that made her happy.

"Why not? I think it's good to have a few playdays every now and then."

"I can't wait!"

Maki was now beaming so brightly that her dark and gloomy expression from just moments ago was nowhere to be seen. She swore to herself that she'd do her best for the festival so that, in a few years, she'd be able to reminisce with everyone.

"You're taking part too, Clan."

"I-I'm not really... any good at sports..."

Clan's personality kept her from rejoicing the same way Maki did. She stubbornly wanted to maintain the appearance that she wasn't lonely, so she pretended not to be interested in participating with everyone.

"You don't say... Well, Nalfa-san, it looks like Princess Clariosa won't be participating."

"That's too bad. I was looking forward to filming everyone running."

"It really is too bad. Especially for the poor citizens that won't get to see and celebrate their princess. What a shame."

“Okay, okay, I get it! I just have to play along, right?!”

In the end, however, she was cajoled into participating by Koutarou.

“You really are a handful,” Koutarou leaned over and whispered so that only Clan could hear him.

He’d only brought up the citizens because he knew that was what it would take to get her to participate, and he knew that she really did want to. She’d regret it later if she didn’t.

“If you know that, then go a little easier on me,” Clan whispered back as she lightly kicked him in the shin.

Clan considered herself the Blue Knight’s partner, but at the same time, she was still a normal girl who wanted to get closer with Koutarou. As such, she couldn’t help wishing he’d be more gentle with her.

“Listen, as a man—”

“I don’t care about that! You sourpuss!”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

“Teeheehee...”

Before they knew it, their whispered argument had escalated into a shouting match, which was interrupted by a cute giggle coming from the girl next to them. It was Nalfa.

“Koutarou-sama, Clan-sama, you two get along so well.”

That’s how she felt as she watched the odd couple. After almost a month of filming them, she had a good grasp on Koutarou and Clan’s twisted relationship. She now knew that this was simply how they showed their affection for one another.

“Hardly! This sourpuss is always teasing me!”

“I wouldn’t dare. I always treat Your Highness with the utmost—”

“You barefaced liar!”

“It’s true, Nalfa-san,” interjected Maki. “Satomi-kun never really teases me, so I think Clan-san is special to him.”

“But you get the most special treatment of all, Maki!” Clan objected.

“Anyway, that’s that! So we’ll all be taking part in the obstacle marathon during the sports festival.”

Now that Koutarou had convinced Clan to participate—or rather, now that he’d gotten her to admit that she wanted to—there was no further dissension.

“All right! I could only cheer for everyone two years ago, but this time I’m going to win!” shouted Sanae.

“This year I’ll defeat Shizuka and carve my name into the annals of Kisshouharukaze High School!”

“I won’t lose to you, Theia-chan! And no mines this time!”

“Maki-chan, I’m thinking I should just sit this one out and cling to my former glory...”

“That’s rather sad... Don’t you have any desire to win?”

“Sakuraba-senpai’s not here this year, so I don’t think I can.”

“I suspect Kii will take the win this year.”

“I think so too, Clan-sama. In terms of overall capabilities, Kiriha-sama is a cut above.”

“The favorite isn’t always the winner, you two. That’s what makes competitions fun.”

Everyone, except for possibly Yurika, was starting to get fired up. Unlike the first time they participated in the obstacle marathon two years ago, however, there was nothing at stake this time. They were only competing to have fun and make memories. It was sure to be an exciting day.

Koutarou and the girls made it to the school office about ten minutes after they’d left their classroom. Their encounter with Nalfa and Kotori had taken up some time, but they’d also been on class cleaning duty this afternoon. All in all, they made it to the office sooner than expected.

“Matsuzaka-sensei!” Koutarou called as soon as he saw Kenichi of the Sun

Rangers.

“Ah, you’re here, Satomi-kun. Then let’s get started right away,” Kenichi replied, getting up from his seat and heading for the door.

Koutarou and the girls did the same, following Kenichi into the conference room they usually used.

“Satomi-kun!”

Harumi, who was no longer a student at Harukaze High, was already sitting in the conference room waiting for them. When she saw Koutarou, however, she quickly got up to greet him.

“Even you’re here, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Yes, I got a call from Megumi-san about the meeting.”

“Then, though it’s clearly not an emergency, whatever this is must be a pretty big deal...”

Harumi had been advising the Sun Rangers on matters regarding magic. Shizuka and Maki also helped out from time to time, but Harumi had taken the lead on the job. There was no one more patient and kind, and she had a personality naturally suited for such diplomatic tasks. Since the Sun Rangers had called her to this meeting, Koutarou knew immediately that it must be about something important. Most likely, it had something to do with Forthorthe, the underground, and the magic world.

“Unfortunately, yes. I’m afraid it is. I’m sorry to summon you all on such short notice.”

Once he closed the door to the conference room—which acted as a secret Sun Ranger base—Kenichi’s tone became much more gracious and polite now that he wasn’t pretending to be a teacher. He and the other Sun Rangers had always respected Koutarou, but as of late, they were especially grateful toward him.

In essence, once it was discovered how active the remnants of Vandarion’s faction were, Empress Elfaria had requested the Blue Knight’s help in handling the matter. Koutarou agreed and was now officially acting on behalf of

Forthorthe.

As far as he was concerned, he had no choice in the matter. This wouldn't just affect Forthorthe, but also the underground, Folsaria, and even Earth as well. Really, he was fighting for everything Alaia had so desperately tried to protect two thousand years ago. But most importantly, he was fighting to protect his home... And the homes of the girls he loved.

"I can't say I'm all too thrilled that things are going exactly like Elle planned. She must be loving this..."

"I assure you, Veltlion, not even Elfaria-san is celebrating the resurgence of Vandarion's faction."

"Indeed, but Mother will find a way to use this to her advantage. She'll undoubtedly play the remnants of Vandarion's faction as a way to keep you tied to Forthorthe. Doing so will put the citizens at ease and make them happy at the same time. You know, like getting three birds with one stone."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. I can't even argue with what she's doing, and that's the most frustrating part."

"Her Majesty always entrusts the most important things to you, Master. Like this case or Her Highness two years ago. She must truly be anxious right now."

"Besides, Satomi Koutarou... You know you can't abandon Forthorthe, or Folsaria for that matter. And I certainly won't let you abandon the People of the Earth after all you've done for us. Giving in is your only option."

"I know, I know... If I say no now, it'll only make me the bad guy here."

Like Theia and Clan, Koutarou was deeply involved in diplomatic matters between Forthorthe and Earth. Carefully situated between the two planets politically, he wanted to be on good terms with the Sun Rangers. Whatever was ahead of them, things would work out better if they worked together.

"So, what exactly has happened?"

Koutarou cut straight to the chase as he took a seat in the conference room. Knowing this was serious business, he wasn't about to spend all afternoon joking around.

“I wanted to share with you some leads on the missing parts,” reported Kenichi.

As it turned out, the cause of their conference today concerned a problem that had cropped up after their run-in with some of Vandarion’s remaining forces the other day. The conclusion to the fight had involved Vandarion’s forces blowing up one of their own remote-controlled ships, presumably for the explicit purpose of spreading its parts far and wide. Their intent was to land as many parts as possible in the hands of Earthlings, creating a nightmare for Forthorthe. Their endgame, however, was identifying the Blue Knight’s secret powers.

Roughly 80 percent of the ship’s parts were recovered on the spot; the problem was the remaining 20 percent. The missing parts were believed to have been collected by an unidentified number of third parties. The Sun Rangers had summoned Koutarou and the girls today to fill them in on the progress that had been made in regards to locating them.

“Did you figure something out?”

“Yes. Japan has done a lot of overseas aid and knows a good deal about how to handle pilfered supplies and technology. Using that know-how, we’ve managed to track down and recover some of the parts.”

Japan was using the foreign currency in its possession—currency too difficult to convert to yen based on fluctuating exchange rates—for financial and technological support. Said support was mostly used properly, but there were cases of supplies and technology being embezzled. Learning from such cases, the Sun Rangers were quickly able to track down some of the missing ship parts.

“That’s amazing, Sun Rangers! How’d you do it?!”

“We started by laying a trap through the black market.”

Most ill-gotten goods were sold through illegal channels. By keeping an eye on those, chances were high that the Sun Rangers would find at least some of the missing parts. And so the Sun Rangers recruited other departments to monitor the black market. Since any Forthorthian technology would be selling for outrageous sums, all they had to do was follow the money. From there, it was simply a matter of locating the seller, locking down the area, and

confiscating the goods. Rinse, repeat.

“These people may have gotten their hands on parts, but the fact that they’re selling them indicates they didn’t know what else to do with them,” said Kiriha.

“It’s just as you say, Black Rose-san. We even found some cases of people trying to auction the parts online, completely unaware that they were even Forthorthian technology,” confirmed Kenichi.

“I’m sure that’s the most extreme case,” Kiriha replied with a dry smile.

For anyone who’d managed to get their hands on a piece of Forthorthian technology but didn’t know what it was or didn’t have the tools necessary to handle it, they’d have no choice but to sell it. It would be a waste just to hold on to it. Kiriha considered that much a foregone conclusion.

“But what about the people who are holding on to the parts they collected? How are you handling those cases?” she asked.

“We’ve already taken several precautions,” Kenichi replied. “We’ve instructed customs and the coast guard to exercise extra scrutiny and vigilance to keep any from leaving the country. We also know it takes powerful technology to analyze Forthorthian tech, so we’re keeping a watchful eye on any groups or businesses that are either known to have such technology at their disposal or are currently trying to buy it. We also know they’d need some of the top minds in science and engineering to do anything with the contraband tech, so we’re keeping an eye on key figures in the field as well.”

Thanks to the special laws regarding Forthorthie that had been passed the other day, exporting alien technology had significantly increased in difficulty. That meant whoever had their hands on it would have to analyze it inside the country, which required exceptional equipment and brilliant minds. The Sun Rangers believed they’d be able to track the technology down by monitoring those two things.

“What do you think, Kiriha-san?” Koutarou asked, turning to her for her opinion.

He felt the Sun Rangers were on the right track, but Kiriha sometimes had insight beyond all others. It was best to consult her at times like this.

“The plan is quite reasonable. It would be impossible to restrict the movement of the parts within the country, so targeting the analysis process is the right choice.”

Checking every single person and inspecting every single car was unrealistic. That meant that, rather than focusing on the parts themselves, it made more sense to focus on the resources someone would need to do anything with the parts. Kiriha saw the logic in that and agreed with the Sun Rangers’ plan.

“Thank you, Black Rose-san. In fact, we’ve already tracked down the whereabouts of several parts.”

“That’s great news. My biggest concern, however, involves the players that are calm and collected enough to lay low for now. But as long as you exercise due vigilance and persistence, I’m sure you’ll be able to keep them from getting away with anything.”

Though Kiriha approved of the Sun Rangers’ plan, she was instantly able to spot its flaws and potential shortcomings. If, for example, someone who’d obtained parts quietly sat on them for the time being, they could later acquire the technology and personnel needed to analyze them under the pretense, say, of a legitimate business expansion. Moreover, if someone slowly amassed the technology and personnel they needed piecemeal, it was much less likely to register on the Sun Rangers’ radar.

And thus Kiriha methodically went through her laundry list of concerns with the Sun Rangers, addressing one item at a time. Clan and Ruth had occasional contributions to make thanks to their technological expertise, but Kiriha’s conversation with the Sun Rangers mostly left everyone else in the dust.

“I can’t keep up with what they’re saying at all...” moaned Yurika.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! What’s ‘defects of crystallization’ mean?”

“Don’t ask me that, Sanae. Ask Clan.”

“Simply put, it’s why solids don’t reach their theoretical strength.”

“Yeah... I still don’t get it, Glasses.”

“Sanae-sama, metal is a very strong material. In practice, however, it is never

quite as strong as it should be. There's a great deal of research as to why, but trying to figure out the exact strength of Forthorthian metals is one of the ways the Sun Rangers are trying to track down the people who have any."

"Oh, I see. So that's what they're talking about, huh?"

"Thank god Kiriha-san is here. Clan-san and Ruth-san too..." Maki muttered as she looked at Kiriha and the Sun Rangers.

Knowing this was something she would never be able to handle on her own, she smiled bitterly.

"Yeah. Without those three, we'd just be normal high school students," added Koutarou.

"Hey, I'm a princess, you know?"

"Yes, yes, Theia. I know."

Theia's wisecrack helped lighten the mood, but Koutarou took Maki's words to heart.

Without the three of them with us, we'd lose sight of the path we need to follow. That would be awful. I'm glad we caught on early...

Yurika could use powerful magic and Theia's combat prowess was second to none. But, as a group, they were only able to shine because Kiriha, Clan, and Ruth were always showing them the way. Without the three of them, they'd be lost. Strength was meaningless if your enemy always eluded you. Koutarou felt that now more than ever.

"Clan, Ruth-san..."

"What's the matter, Veltlion?"

"What is it, Master?"

"If the two of you and Kiriha-san were to fall, the rest of us would surely follow. So make sure you don't push yourselves too hard."

"I... I know full well the position I'm in."

"You may count on me, Master."

"You're the one I'm most worried about, Ruth-san. You're a guardian knight,

after all.”

Ruth held the title of Nye, a guardian knight. When push came to shove, she would use her own body to shield Theia and Koutarou if she had to. But that would inadvertently put them all in danger, and that’s precisely what Koutarou wanted to avoid.

“Please don’t worry. I won’t leave you alone, Master. I’ll always be at your side. I know what you fear the most,” Ruth said with a smile.

Ruth was intent on protecting Koutarou, but Koutarou feared solitude more than anything. So rather than throwing her life away, Ruth was determined to keep a situation where she would have to do so from ever arising in the first place. That way she could protect Koutarou and his heart. And with that resolution, she turned a warm smile on the boy she loved. Seeing it and knowing what it meant, Koutarou bashfully looked away.

“Th-Then that’s fine...”

“Heehee...”

Koutarou and Ruth’s discussion ended there, but Kiriha’s discussion with the Sun Rangers was far from over. It would continue for some time yet.

The nature of the fight is clearly changing...

Listening in on both conversations, however, Harumi noticed a similarity between them. It was only necessary to have such talks because the nature of their fight had changed.

Thinking back on it, the war had started with individual skirmishes. They’d gained allies and friends who were willing to work together with them, and gradually things grew in scale until they escalated into a full-on war. But even so, there’d always been a goal in sight. Whether it was defeating a specific enemy or defending a certain location, there had always been an achievable objective that would bring an end to the fighting. But things were different now. They were fighting multiple uncertain enemies, and defeating them might not even make a difference. Taking out the remnants of Vandarion’s faction wasn’t necessarily going to be the end of the fight. There was no clear goal in sight that would spell peace. It was all they could do now to gather information

and plan accordingly, which was why Koutarou was so worried for Kiriha and the other girls who played an integral role in that process.

I just hope that nothing happens...

They were up against an invisible enemy in an uncertain fight with no discernible end. It cast a dark shadow on their lives, which worried Harumi immensely. The fear that a sudden ambush could steal their future was seizing her heart.

Once their meeting with the Sun Rangers was over, Koutarou and the girls left the conference room and headed for their various clubs. Since the situation was still developing and hadn't escalated to emergency levels as of yet, Koutarou and company were simply going about their business for now. And as far as their daily lives were concerned at the moment, the upcoming club obstacle marathon was the most urgent business they had.

“...”

Harumi sat staring out of the knitting society's club room window. Now that it was May, the early summer sun was shining brilliantly outside. But you would never know it looking at Harumi's gloomy expression.

“What's the matter, Sakuraba-senpai?” Yurika asked.

Koutarou was there as well, but it was Yurika who approached Harumi first. Harumi was a precious friend to her, and she couldn't stand to see her looking so down.

“Oh, it's nothing.”

“Then why the long face?”

“It's nothing much. I'm just still thinking about our earlier discussion, and I confess it has me a little worried. There's no clear goal in sight this time, you know?”

“Really? I can never see the goal anyway, so I guess it feels the same way it always does to me.”

“So how do you fight your anxiety, Yurika-san?”

“I don’t.”

“What?”

“I’m stupid, so I can never come up with answers. So all that I can do is believe in Satomi-san and the others.”

“Believe in Satomi-kun and the others... You really are strong, Yurika-san.”

“I *am* a magical girl of love and courage, after all.”

“That’s true. Then I’ll follow your example, Yurika-san.”

“That’s the spirit!”

Koutarou secretly listened in on the girls’ conversation while pretending to read a pamphlet on the obstacle marathon.

Yurika’s not the same girl she was two years ago...

He too had picked up on Harumi’s melancholy, so he was planning on stepping in if Yurika wasn’t able to lift her spirits... But it now seemed there would be no need for that.

Heh, looks like I didn’t need to worry.

Koutarou was both happy and a little sad when he realized that things were fine left to Yurika. Really, he was realizing that his handful of a little sister had grown up before he even knew it. And with that thought, he started to read the pamphlet that he’d merely been pretending to read so far. Only two members from each club were allowed to participate in the marathon. That meant, with Harumi’s graduation, it would have to be him and Yurika on the team.

“By the way, Sakuraba-senpai, Satomi-san’s only pretending not to notice, but he knew you were feeling down too.”

“You think so?”

“I saw him sneak a glance over here, so I’m sure of it. You could probably get anything you wanted out of him right now.”

“Heehee, then maybe I’ll see what I can do.”

Koutarou heard that part too, but simply kept reading. He didn’t know what to say, and moreover, he was far too embarrassed to join the conversation now.

He kept his face buried in the pamphlet, but that didn't block out the sound of footsteps and the creak of the folding chair immediately to his right as someone sat down.

“I'm sorry, Satomi-kun... Would you mind for a little while?”

Suddenly, Harumi leaned over and rested her head on Koutarou's shoulder. She also reached out and put her right hand on his knee, a blue and white ribbon dangling from her wrist.



No...

Koutarou had to pull himself together. His first reaction was to push Harumi away—an old bad habit he hadn't quite shaken—but he quickly purged the thought from his mind and began considering what he should do instead. After almost an entire minute of asking himself if it was really all right, he gently placed his hand over Harumi's. She entwined her fingers with his and squeezed his hand.

"Heehee, you made the right call—for both of you. Heeheehee..." Yurika giggled.

"Idiot..." Koutarou scolded.

"I may be an idiot, but I'm a praiseworthy idiot."

"Yeah... I guess you are, Yurika."

"Eeheehee."

With his free hand, Koutarou patted Yurika on the head. While the knitting society wouldn't get around to discussing the obstacle marathon today, they were still working on their team dynamic in their own way.

Normally there were two additional members present for knitting society activities: Nalfa and Kotori. Since they knew Koutarou and the other girls were headed to a meeting, however, they went to visit the other club they'd both joined—the photography club.

"That's fine. The two of you have my permission to participate."

Really, Nalfa and Kotori had come to beg the club president to let them be on the team for the club obstacle marathon. As first-years, however, they knew there was a high chance they'd be turned down. But contrary to their expectations, the club president readily gave them his approval. Doubting her ears, Nalfa excitedly leaned forward and questioned the president.

"Are you sure?!"

"Yeah, I don't mind. We're the photography club, so we're usually on the sidelines recording the event rather than participating. It's actually been several years since we even entered a team. Everyone wants to be taking pictures

instead.”

“Now that you mention it... I’d love to photograph it too.”

The photography club, of course, was naturally more interested in taking pictures than participating. They’d tried entering members just for the sake of publicity before, but it hadn’t exactly gotten any new members to join the club. Ever since, the photography club had been absent from the race. And because their team slots were vacant anyway, the club president had no objection to letting Nalfa and Kotori participate.

“Besides, this year is special. If we show off the fact that Nalfa-san joined the photography club, we might actually rope in some new blood. So I think having the two of you participate while the rest of us record the event like usual would be the best of both worlds.”

Much like the knitting society, the photography club had a hard time getting new members to join up. In the age of smartphones and instant photography, traditional photography and cameras were on the decline. There was less and less interest in the photography club every passing year as a result. The club could see the writing on the wall, so they’d branched out into filming too, but even that hadn’t been enough to slow the club’s waning. That’s why, if they had a golden opportunity to pump some life into the club now, the president was going to take it. And that golden opportunity was Nalfa.

“Do you really think people are going to join just because of me?”

“Now’s our best chance to find out. Come fall, we’ll get more Forthorthian transfer students who’ll be joining all kinds of clubs. But right now, all eyes are on you. And all press is good press, you know? It’s not like it’s going to hurt to have you participate.”

“It won’t hurt... Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

Nalfa didn’t think she was anything special. She certainly didn’t compare to Theia or Koutarou; she was just a normal civilian. That’s why she was doubtful that she could be of any help to the photography club. But the spots for the obstacle marathon team were open, and like the president said, Nalfa joining in wouldn’t hurt... So in the end, Nalfa didn’t have any qualms about participating.

“I’ll do my best with Kotori for the club’s sake!”

“Y-Yeah, I’ll do my best too.”

There, Kotori finally joined the discussion. She was naturally shy even with the other members of the photography club, so she’d happily left the talking to Nalfa. She would’ve been much happier escaping into virtual reality on her smartphone, but that would have been rude in front of the president. She did her best to follow Nalfa’s lead.

“You don’t have to win. Just do your best to stand out,” the president advised.

“I think that’s smart. Even if we tried to win, we’d only get fourth or fifth place at best,” Nalfa replied.

“That’s a pretty specific prediction.”

“I don’t think we could beat Theia-sama and the others.”

“She’s special, after all... I’ve even heard she’s looking to secure the Triple Crown in the sports festival.”

“Heehee, that sounds just like her.”

Rumors of Theia being Forthorthian royalty were gradually spreading through the school. After all Theia had done for and with the students of Harukaze High over the last two years, however, it would take more than a couple of rumors to change what everyone thought of her. Theia’s big, well-known personality was partially to thank for that.

“Kotori, let’s do our best together!”

“Okay, but I’m not really the sporty type...”

“And I won’t be any good at the challenges. We’ll make a great team, so have a little more confidence!”

“You’re right, Nalfa-chan. Thank you. I’ll give it my best shot!”

Nalfa was relatively athletic, but she was careless. She was also completely unfamiliar with the challenges that would dot the marathon. Meanwhile, Kotori was shy and sluggish, but she was reliable and clever. If they could each help

make up for what the other was lacking, they could do well for themselves. At least, that's what the club president was thinking as he watched them now.

Now that Yurika had taken up the mantle of presidency for the knitting society, the cosclub was left to grieve the loss of their prime candidate to take over for them. At some point, however, they became convinced that Yurika wouldn't have been quite up to the task of leading the cosclub. She'd need to manage events, keep the other members on track for their costume deadlines, handle the budget, negotiate with the student council... And that was just the tip of the iceberg. So the realization finally hit them: wouldn't that all be too much for Yurika? Soon after, the vice president—acknowledged for her years of hard work and dedication to the club—was elected to be the new president. Thus the cosclub learned there was more to leadership than enthusiasm and talent.

“But I think that enthusiasm and talent will decide the winner of the obstacle marathon!”

The reforged cosclub quickly hit another bump in the road—they didn't have anyone to participate in the interclub obstacle marathon. More specifically, they didn't have anyone to be Maki's partner. They'd long decided Maki would be participating, but the second spot on the team was still open. They'd need to find a star cosplayer to fill Yurika's shoes. Much like the photography club, the cosclub was entering the marathon because they wanted to find new members, and they'd have to put their best foot forward to get attention on themselves. It was times like this they needed Yurika's flair and charisma the most, but she'd left them to become the knitting society president. Allowing her to be part of another club had totally backfired.

“In that case, I guess the president and I have to do it,” said Maki.

Since she wanted to participate and the spots were open, no one in the cosclub objected to Maki entering the marathon on behalf of the club. In fact, they were excited about it. She had enough individuality that when people looked at her, they saw her and not just a costume. Unlike the happy-go-lucky Yurika, however, Maki was a rather cool girl. She looked best in outfits that suited her personality, so it went without saying that would be what she wore

for the event.

“I’m the problem, Aika-san! I don’t have the brightness or energy to compete with you...”

But Maki was such a striking cosplayer that it was a bit of an issue for the other girls—the new president especially. Stamina-wise, she was a perfect candidate for the marathon. She was part of the rhythmic gymnastics club and worked hard to train her body. In that sense, she was a far superior choice to Yurika. The problem was her cosplay style. She was a serious, hard-working girl that had the same type of cool and stoic aura that Maki did. And because they shared a style, it would make it hard for them to cosplay in a way that allowed them to play off of each other as partners. There was no way she could be bright and sunny Yurika’s replacement.

“Then should I wear something brighter?” asked Maki.

“I don’t think that’s the way to go about this,” the new president replied.

“Then we do have a problem on our hands, don’t we?”

“If only someone as radiant as Yurika would fall out of the sky...”

A brilliant star like Yurika was a hard act to follow. Using her polar opposite, Maki, was a good approach, but it would also make Yurika’s absence more apparent. The dilemma troubled the cosclub greatly, but...

Bam!

“I overheard everything!”

All of a sudden, the door to the club room burst open with so much force that it wouldn’t have surprised anyone if it had flown right off the hinges—an immediate clue as to the thoughtless nature of the person responsible.

“And you can leave it all to me!”

There, Sanae burst through the open door. Normally, taking part in the club obstacle marathon required that participants be members of the club or society they represented. Sanae had first been interested in the knitting club, but they already had two participants in the race. And so her eyes turned to the cosclub, who she knew would be down Yurika. Since their primary club activities

involved wearing cute clothes, she wouldn't even mind joining if she had to.

“The magical girl knight of love and courage, Higashihongan Sanae, makes her appearance!”

Upon bursting into the club room, Sanae struck a pose. She was only wearing her school uniform and her winged backpack, but she posed with all the confidence of a cosplayer in full gear. The aura she expelled for no reason in that moment was enough to dazzle even those without the ability to sense it.



“Higashihongan-san?!”

“Someone really fell from the sky?!”

Sanae’s brazenness and her overflowing confidence were something... And they were exactly what the cosclub needed right now. She easily had a presence strong enough to rival Yurika’s. Upon realizing that, the new president cried out...

“You’re hired!”

“Wise choice! Everyone, just follow after me!”

The president was exalted, but she was also speaking on behalf of all the other club members. Though they didn’t say it out loud, they too felt like their savior had arrived.

Is this really going to be okay...?

Only one person appeared to be anxious about the whole ordeal, and that was Maki. She had a good idea of what Sanae was thinking.

It does seem it’ll be fun... So why not?

Maki, however, knew she had a bad habit of being pessimistic. So for once, she decided to trust in her friends and go with the flow.

The home ec club’s biggest dilemma regarding the obstacle marathon wasn’t who’d be participating, but rather what refreshments they’d be serving at the rest stations. They knew right off the bat that they’d be entering powerhouse Shizuka, and they’d chosen a confident first-year student to be her partner. As such, they quickly moved on to other business and were presently discussing what they’d be serving on the day of the race.

“The student council president said that there are currently forty teams registered, but they’re expecting more than last year. That being the case, we’re going to need to make more bread for the speed eating challenge.”

Having taken over as president of the home ec club this year, Shizuka was leading the discussion as she briskly whisked together a dish. She was worried about the role at first, but she’d since gotten used to her responsibilities. Being

able to confide in Harumi and hear her advice on the subject had gone a long way in that regard.

“I wonder why more people are signing up this year...” one of the club members mused aloud upon hearing Shizuka’s report.

The vice president, who’d attended the student council meeting alongside Shizuka, shrugged and said, “We’ve got transfer students coming this fall, right? Everyone’s busting their butts to prepare for that.”

“I see, I see. So this is kind of like a turf war between the clubs,” replied the curious student with a sage nod.

Clubs were traditionally held in high esteem at Kisshouharukaze High School. And while they didn’t let it show, the clubs were always locked in secret rivalries with one another. It made for a lot of friendly competition, but there was really something at stake this time. With more Forthorthian transfer students coming in the fall, the smoldering rivalries between clubs were fanned into full-on flames.

Every club in school would love to have a transfer student join, and they were all hoping that would be the real prize to winning the marathon this year. They knew Nalfa was actively sending footage of her school life back home to Forthorthe, so anyone coming to Harukaze High in the fall would know about the upcoming obstacle marathon. And if the clubs could get just one transfer student to join up, it would be a newsworthy event. Their club would be known nationwide, which would surely bring in even more local members. So while it was but a single event of the sports festival, every club was getting fired up about the obstacle marathon.

I’m still sure the new kids will flock to the drama club, the knitting society, and the baseball team though...

Shizuka smiled wryly to herself as she listened to her fellow club members talking. Knowing the truth about the Blue Knight, she could easily predict which clubs the Forthorthian transfer students would be drawn to. There was the legendary drama club that had helped create and train the Blue Knight; the knitting society that the Blue Knight, who’d taught Alaia how to knit, belonged to; and finally the baseball team that the Blue Knight himself adored. Those

three clubs would inevitably snag the most interest, but bringing that up and bursting everyone's bubble now would only sap their motivation. Shizuka thus decided to keep quiet.

"President, aren't we going to try to appeal to future transfer students too?"

"Heehee, you don't have to worry about that. Nalfa-chan will come to interview our club later. It seems the Forthorthians are plenty interested in the cuisine here."

Shizuka had already taken the necessary measures to ensure the home ec club got its time in the spotlight. Really, it had been an easy agreement. Nalfa wanted to cover Japanese food, and her first thought had been of Shizuka. She'd come to her about it right around the time she was thinking of how to drum up some interest from future transfer students. And so they'd decided Nalfa would come to check out the home ec club before the race—an arrangement that was mutually beneficial.

"So you made a deal behind closed doors, huh, President?"

"That's right, so let's focus on getting our work done for now. Let's all do our best, okay?"

"Yes!" the club members all answered in harmony.

The home ec club had been getting just as worked up as the other clubs, but Shizuka's clever move got them what they wanted while giving them a reason and the opportunity to focus on the task ahead of them. Her kind, nurturing nature would take her a long way as president.

Kiriha still took it upon herself to play the role of a perfect honor student while at school. Part of that was diligently attending track and field team practices. As such, she'd significantly built up her strength and stamina over the last two years in addition to getting smarter. She was excelling in academics and athletics simultaneously.

"Heya, Kiri-chan!"

"It's been a while, Kurano-san."

“Takahashi-senpai?! Kawashima-senpai?!”

Today, two unexpected guests decided to pay her a visit. They were her seniors who’d graduated in March of last year. They’d lovingly watched over her when she first joined the team, and she felt she could largely be herself around them.

“What brings you two here?” Kiriha asked.

“We wanted to see how much our little Kiri-chan had grown,” Takahashi replied.

“She’s just pulling your leg. We heard that this year’s obstacle marathon was going to be interesting, so we came to check things out,” Kawashima clarified.

“I see you have sharp ears,” Kiriha teased.

“Why didn’t you tell us, Kiri-chan?!” Takahashi wailed.

“Ignore Takahashi. We just came to visit the club and see how things were coming along. Really, we’re just here for fun,” Kawashima admitted.

“For fun, hmm? I see you’re becoming a bit more like Takahashi-senpai as a university student, Kawashima-senpai,” Kiriha continued to tease.

“Stop! I don’t want to hear that! I guess I just kind of caught Forthorthe fever.”

“It looks like the entire school has.”

The two alumni had decided to pay their alma mater a visit after hearing how bustling things had gotten. The club obstacle marathon was a heated affair every year, but things were off the charts this year with visitors from Forthorthe getting involved. And so Takahashi and Kawashima had come by to lend a hand, partly out of goodwill and partly out of curiosity.

“So how’s the marathon team coming along, Kiri-chan?”

“I’m sure you’re one of the two runners, Kurano-san.”

“We’ve been discussing whether we should stick to the club’s usual strategy or not.”

With her excellent grades and skill as a runner, the club swiftly decided that

Kiriha would be the track and field team's first entry into the marathon. The issue was her partner. Their traditional strategy was to pick the fastest runner and the smartest person on the team. Kiriha fulfilled the latter role, so by those guidelines, they simply needed to supplement her speed. Kiriha was an extremely competent runner on her own, however, and the track and field team was really itching for a win this year. They were considering abandoning their usual plan and picking another smart runner instead of just a fast one.

“Whaaat?! You’re putting an end to the storied tradition of the musclebrain strategy?!”

Takahashi was deeply disappointed to hear this news. The entire idea behind the strategy was to have the faster runner run their heart out to impress people, while the smarter runner methodically worked through the challenges as they paced themselves towards the goal. The strategy had given Takahashi—a fast runner—a chance to shine in her time, so she was sorry to see it go.

“I see, Kurano-san. You’re giving up an extra chance to make an impression for an extra chance to go for the win... It’s not a bad idea.”

Kawashima, on the other hand, nodded in approval. There was a high chance that their usual strategy wouldn’t be as effective this year. When it came to making an impression, the track and field team wouldn’t stand out as much with every club at school trying their hardest. They couldn’t just dash out in front to outshine everyone like usual. That was why the team members had started considering a strategy that would be more likely to land them a win. They could get their time in the spotlight on the podium.

“But you’ll still need someone who’s fast in order to make it work.”

“That’s what the current debate is about. Please take a look at this, Kawashima-senpai.”

There, Kiriha handed Kawashima a piece of paper.

“Let’s see here...”

“Lemme see!”

Takahashi crowded in so they could read it together. The paper appeared to be a list of times and grades for each of the track and field team members.

“I see... This is a problem.”

“How so, Kawa-chan?”

“Simply put, there’s nobody else who has both brains and brawn.”

“You mean they’ve only got stupid people and slow people?”

“It’s not that bad, but that’s more or less the problem.”

“Then what are they supposed to do?!”

The current girls’ track and field club members were a bit too lopsided in terms of abilities. They were looking for a student who was at least average at both academics and athletics, but most of the team members were good at one and not the other.

“This means you’ll have to make a choice favoring one over the other eventually. What are you going to do, Kurano-san?”

“At the moment, we’re making full use of the team’s connections to figure out what strategies the other teams are using. We’ll make our decision based on that information.”

Since every club, team, and society in school was looking to score a win this year, the track team could make an informed decision about their strategy if they knew what everyone else was doing. Reconnaissance was an important part of warfare, and Kiriha’s battle had already begun.

“That’s our Kiri-chan for you! You think of everything!”

“Heh, I guess you guys didn’t need our help after all... I’m not sure if I should be happy or sad...”

Both Takahashi and Kawashima broke out into smiles again. They were happy that their juniors were able to handle themselves on their own, but they were also a little sorry that they weren’t needed. They wanted their cute little juniors to stay their cute little juniors forever. But this was their time to shine. Sensing that, Takahashi and Kawashima decided to trust and cheer on Kiriha and the others from the sidelines.

Nalfa wasn’t the only intergalactic transfer student at Harukaze High. With

their identities now exposed, everyone around school knew that Theia and Ruth were also Forthorthians. Of course, the club they were both a part of wanted to make full use of that.

“All right! You’re safe in my hands!” roared Theia.

“I’ll gladly accept the honor,” said Ruth.

“We’re counting on you two! This is our chance to really get the drama club out there!” cheered the president.

Indeed, Theia and Ruth were both part of the drama club. They were also technically part of the cheerleading squad, but that was in name only now. They had been fully devoted to the drama club ever since Theia’s plays, so they were happy to represent it as part of the interclub obstacle marathon this year. It was what they wanted, and the drama club was happy to hear their offer. There’d been a bit of a quandary about who should participate. Everything thus seemed to be in order, but there was still something on Theia’s mind.

“What about Mackenzie? Are you sure he shouldn’t be participating too?”

Kenji was also a star of the drama club. He was athletic and smart, which made him an ideal pick for the marathon. Theia found it strange that the club hadn’t volunteered him for the job already.

“Oh, Kenji-kun’s currently out on loan.”

“Out on loan? What does that mean?”

“You know we work together with lots of other clubs, right?”

“That’s true. The cosclub and the handicrafts club are always helping out with costumes, and I recall the newspaper club and the music club pitching in for us too.”

There was a limit to how much the drama club could do on their own, so they were constantly requesting help from other clubs in their areas of expertise. By working together, they could accomplish great things. The Blue Knight plays were just one such example.

“Lots of the other liberal arts clubs don’t have any athletic members. Some of them are just too small, too.”

“I see. So that’s why Mackenzie’s on loan.”

“Yup. We’ve let another club borrow him, and we’ll be lending out a few more members too since we have you and Ruth-san to count on for the marathon.”

“Does this mean Mackenzie-sama is currently trying out new outfits for the handicraft club?”

“That’s right, Ruth-san. We’ll loan out the more attractive members to clubs that are looking for, well, looks.”

The drama club was relatively big in terms of members, and their roster had skyrocketed after the success of Theia’s plays. As a result, they had plenty of members to spare for the marathon. That’s why they were readily loaned to clubs that had helped out with plays and such in the past. All in all, it was a very symbiotic, welcome relationship.

“So I’m glad to have you two participating. You’re more than fit for the job. And besides, your plays were based on a legend from Forthorthe, right? If anything, it’d be a shame not to show you off at a time like this.”

The drama club president thought it would make the strongest impression to send Theia and Ruth out together. Having two Forthorthian transfer students in the club was sure to get plenty of attention, both from current students and from incoming transfer students in the fall. Moreover, the drama club president had heard the rumors about Theia being a princess. Having her participate would be a win-win.

“Understood! You’ve convinced me, President! I’ll do everything in my power to ensure our mutual prosperity!” Theia loudly declared after hearing the president out.

Out of consideration for the other club members, Theia had been a bit hesitant to accept her role in the race so readily. But now that she knew she had their full blessing, she was ready to fight to her heart’s content.

“I will do what I can to help as well.”

Though Ruth spoke more modestly than Theia, that wasn’t a reflection of her motivation. She personally hadn’t taken part in the obstacle marathon two years ago, so she was looking forward to running with everyone. She was still

keeping up her sword training, but she'd started adding in extra jogging sessions to train her stamina and prepare for the race too. So despite her calm demeanor, she was getting rather fired up.

"I'm counting on you two!"

This was a crucial contest for the drama club president as well. If the club made a good impression by showing off Theia and Ruth, they could get even more members before fall. They'd be having a new performance for the cultural festival, which would be right around the time the new students showed up. It was a big opportunity—one they couldn't afford to miss.

The science club didn't have much to do with the obstacle marathon. It wasn't anything that showed off any of their strengths, even if they would have an edge in the math and science related challenges. They'd never even once entered a team, instead choosing to keep their distance. It would just be a waste of time, which was better spent on their research anyway. In short, the science club was a standout exception when all the other clubs were kicking into high gear for the race.

So when the not-so-sociable Clan mustered what courage she had and asked the president to let her take part, he responded with a dubious look.

"I don't really mind, but why?"

The president had simply assumed this year would be like any other with the science club sitting things out on the sidelines. He was curious as to Clan's motivations.

"B-Because... all of my friends were talking about doing it..."

Clan wasn't very good at talking to people she wasn't close with. She hadn't always been that way, but her time-traveling adventures had seriously humbled her. She no longer had the unbridled confidence she used to. Gone were the days that she ignored how other people thought and felt. She was much more sensitive now, and it made her all the more desperate.

"Ah, I recall that it was Satomi-kun who brought you here."

"What?! No, um, I mean... It's not just him..."

“That’s fine. We normally don’t take part, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea to put you out there this year.”

Koutarou had introduced Clan to the science club in April, which had caused something of a stir in the club. The president was hoping something similar might happen externally if the science club introduced her to the whole school. It was only logical. And the obstacle marathon would be a good way to do precisely that.

“That said, there’s no guarantee that anyone else in the club will join you. That would mean I’d have to do it myself, but as you can see, I might not even finish the race. In short, don’t count on me.”

The science club president was a rather tubby boy. He’d long neglected his health in favor of his research, and the rest of the science club was in much the same condition. Everyone was either gaunt or chubby, neither of which boded well for their performance in the marathon. Though he didn’t admit it out loud, the president was planning to drop out of the race shortly after it started if he had to participate himself. Two club members were required to enter the race, but only the better of their results counted towards the rankings. That meant that Clan’s performance would be unaffected by his, so he wasn’t worried about it.

“That’s just fine. As thanks, I’ll do what I can to bring some attention to this club.”

“If you really want to thank me, I’d prefer it if you taught me about Forthorthian technology.”

“I’d love to, but...”

“I know. A sudden advance in technology without the maturity to handle it will lead to the collapse of society. All I’m expecting from Forthorthe is your help in speeding up our advancement.”

“...Were you perhaps joking when you said you wanted technology?”

“I was.”

“Heh, this nation’s sense of humor is hard to understand sometimes.”

“I bet that causes Satomi-kun a good bit of trouble.”

“Agh, I wasn’t talking about him!”

“Really? It sure sounded like it to me.”

There, the science club president finally smiled. Unlike Clan, he wasn’t bad at dealing with people; he just thought it was a pain. But even to him, Clan’s awkward and honest reactions were adorable. In the name of scientific development, he secretly hoped deep down that all Forthorthians were as open-minded and as kind as she was.

Pros and Cons of the Strategy

Friday, May 6th

A few days after Koutarou and the girls' first meeting with the Sun Rangers about the Forthorthian ship parts, they were called once again to the conference room. It seemed there'd been a development in the case.

"I'm sorry for calling you so frequently," apologized Kenichi.

"Is it bad news?" Koutarou asked warily.

"No, actually. For the time being, it's all good news. We've gotten some leads on more parts," Kenichi declared proudly.

Kenichi had already informed them of the parts the Sun Rangers had uncovered on the black market, but they'd now discovered additional parts that weren't available for sale. This was indeed exciting news, and Koutarou responded accordingly.

"Really?!"

"Yes. These leads are the direct result of cracking down on customs and investigating corporations in possession of supercomputers."

It was also a result of the Sun Rangers' swift work. They'd kept a watchful eye out for anyone trying to make suspicious exports while simultaneously looking into businesses that already had the technology to examine Forthorthian tech domestically. And thanks to that, there had been several developments in the case of the missing parts.

"In regards to the exports, it was just as Black Rose-san suspected. Several foreign metal manufacturers were working together to acquire pieces of the ship's hull and armored plating."

"The materials come first, after all. Forthorthian-made metal could be the basis for boundless other products. I'm glad we could stop them before it was leaked."

Kiriha had been right on the money. In order to replicate any other Forthorthian technology, a manufacturer would need the appropriate base materials—in other words, the right metal. For example, spaceship engines that generated vast amounts of energy also generated vast amounts of heat. Anyone who sought to build one would need metal that could stand up to the job. So when it came to making sure the world didn't get its hands on Forthorthian technology prematurely, step number one was making sure it didn't get a hold of Forthorthian materials.

The Sun Rangers were keeping as tight a lid on the situation as they could, but they still couldn't let their guard down. There was always a chance that someone would try to smuggle out small metal fragments, which would be much harder to detect and much easier to hide among other metal products. The Sun Rangers certainly had their work cut out for them. Really, you could say that their work was only just getting started.

"There are several corporations that are behaving suspiciously at the moment, but we're staying on top of them," Kenichi announced.

"Jeez, well, job well done for handling that. What about the supercomputers?" Koutarou inquired.

"We've got leads on a small handful of corporations."

"A small handful? Well, considering the technology of this planet, I suppose there could only *be* a small handful of them," Clan interjected.

There was no debating that Earth's technology was about a thousand years behind Forthorthe's. That's why a high-powered supercomputer (by Earth's standards) was required to analyze Forthorthian technology. Without one, it would take years just to break down basic encryptions. So if a handful of corporations were on the Sun Rangers' watchlist, that had to mean that every entity with the technology to bid had a hand in the game. That bothered Clan.

"Only one corporation has actually made a move so far. The rest are either working together with other businesses or are presently trying to acquire supercomputers of their own."

The corporations already in possession of high-end supercomputers were of course aware that the government was watching them. Few were bold enough

to take a gamble under the circumstances. Doing so could mean getting cut out of the game prematurely, but not every player was so cagey. There were smaller businesses that had come to the larger corporations to try to get in on a good deal, which had already been their undoing. Then there were other companies that had sought out like-minded compatriots and, in an attempt to fly under the government's radar, tried linking up several mid-tier supercomputers to get the job done. Such rings were easy to bust due to the sheer number of people involved, however, and the government quickly shut them down as well. Lastly, there were certain businesses that were brazen enough to openly purchase new supercomputers. Needless to say, the government had come down on them as well.

"Ah, so that's what you meant," said a relieved Clan.

"Don't just assume that everyone has a secret supercomputer at their disposal. That part of you is still like a sheltered princess," Koutarou admonished with a sigh.

"Why you—"

Clan was about ready to explode at Koutarou, but held herself back. It was the small vacuum tube in her hand that gave her the power to look the other way. As she glanced down at it, the expression on her face softened.

"As long as you know about that side of me, then there shouldn't be any problems," Clan said with a smile that declared she saw right through Koutarou. "Or are you saying that you can't accept someone so sheltered as an ally?"

"Th-That's not what I..."

"If that's all it takes to fluster you, Satomi-kun, you should just stop teasing her," piped up Shizuka.

"Give me a break, Landlord-san."

"Heeheehee. The truth is that Koutarou enjoys seeing Glasses get angry," Sanae giggled.

Because Sanae could read the auras of others, there was no hiding anything from her. If she commented on how someone was feeling, it was invariably true.

“H-Hey, Sanae, put a lid on it. Don’t go running off at the mouth like that.”

“Fiiine.”

Koutarou hurriedly shut Sanae up, but the damage was done. The girls were all grinning at Koutarou, except for a red-faced Clan who was looking away.

This is getting harder for me as of late...

Recently, Koutarou had been struggling to hide his feelings like normal. The girls were growing wise to his tricks and picking up on the true meaning behind them. Of course, the reverse was also true. But being a teenage boy made the situation all the more embarrassing for Koutarou... especially because he wasn’t totally disappointed with this development.

“Heh... Now, do you mind if I continue, Satomi-kun?” Kenichi said in a very teacherly manner.

Catching a glimpse of adolescence in the normally mature Koutarou, Kenichi couldn’t help but fondly recall his own teenage years. He silently wished Koutarou well as he blossomed into adulthood.

“I’m sorry. Go ahead,” replied Koutarou.

“Well then... Ahem,” Kenichi continued. “In addition to what I’ve already reported to you, we’ve detected some strange movements. This is the real reason we called you here today...”

Acting again as a Sun Ranger, Kenichi signaled Megumi behind him with a wave of his hand. Taking the cue, she pulled up a video on the large screen hooked up to the wall.

“Who’s that?” Koutarou immediately asked.

“This is Professor Christopher Brown. Specializing in theoretical physics, he’s a young star in the world of astrophysics, doing research on black holes and the like,” Kenichi explained.

The screen displayed an unshaven white man in his forties. Kenichi had called him young, but that was strictly in terms of being a renowned scholar.

“Black holes and astrophysics? Those aren’t words I’m pleased to hear with this kind of timing,” Theia said with a stern expression.

Forthorthe's space distortion technology was an offshoot of astrophysics, and it had specifically been developed by studying black holes. So to hear those two things come up now, Theia had a rather sinking feeling.

"The professor suddenly arrived in Japan a few days ago. His goals are currently unknown," Kenichi continued.

"I see. So your surveillance net just picked him up," Koutarou observed.

He could see why Theia was alarmed by the news of the professor's arrival. It likely wasn't coincidence.

"That's right. After he entered the country, we were able to confirm that he's in contact with the R&D branch of a certain corporation. Based on the materials said corporation has been dealing in lately, we believe they must have ship parts related to navigation or propulsion on their hands. But the thing is..." Kenichi paused briefly, a perplexed look crossing his face. "Professor Brown was one of the scholars cautioning against a sudden influx of Forthorthian technology."

Professor Brown had readily foreseen that the introduction of Forthorthe's highly advanced technology would ruin Earth's economies. He openly warned people to rein in their desire for personal gain lest a terrible fate befall the planet, and he was as highly respected for his advocacy of restraint as he was for his research.

"That's strange. Why would someone like that come to Japan to help decode the technology, then?" Koutarou wondered aloud.

"We don't know yet," Kenichi answered. "It's a problem that fell into our lap just this morning..."

"So how did you find out?"

"Well, you see, his daughter has transferred to our school."

Indeed, the professor had a sixteen-year-old daughter named Emily who'd enrolled at Kisshouharukaze High School as of today. It was only upon seeing her parents' names on the paperwork that the Sun Rangers realized Professor Brown was in Japan.

“That’s lucky. If it weren’t for that, the professor might’ve flown totally under the radar.”

“We were indeed lucky, but this is ultimately why we called you. If the corporation the professor is in touch with is really analyzing Forthorthian parts, we want you to try to gather some evidence. We currently have our hands full with another matter...”

While it was fortunate the Sun Rangers had picked up on Professor Brown’s arrival in Japan, the issue had cropped up too suddenly. The Sun Rangers had a great deal of other work on their plates, which was why they were turning to Koutarou and the girls for help. They had a certain degree more freedom, and no reason to turn down their longtime allies. Especially not if this involved Forthorthe.

After stepping out of the conference room, Koutarou and company headed straight back to their classroom. They needed information, and they knew just who to get it from.

“Emily-chan? Yeah, I know her. You mean the new girl in class 2-C, right?”

“Attaboy, Mackenzie! I’ve never been so happy for your philandering ways!”

Matsudaira Kenji, a.k.a Mackenzie, was an expert when it came to the fairer sex. Koutarou knew right off the bat that he’d be their go-to for information on Emily, or any girl for that matter, without having to meet her directly.

“N-Nii-san...”

“Now, now, Kotori!”

This knowledge, however, was a point of contention with his little sister, who let him know it by sending a rather sour glare his way. Nalfa did her best to comfort the incensed Kotori, but it wasn’t having much effect.

“Why are you asking about Emily-chan, Kou? Don’t tell me you’re thinking about switching targets.”

There, Kenji unknowingly stepped on a landmine. Now, instead of just Kotori, the eight girls with Koutarou were all glaring at him too.

Ack!

Surrounded on all sides, Kenji finally realized the trouble he'd gotten himself into. But he was used to tense situations like this and did his best to casually smooth things over.

"Just kidding. I know you're not like that, Kou. So, really, what's up?"

Kenji put on his best smile and tried to play it off as a simple joke with his best friend. After everything he'd been through, disarming a simple landmine like this was a cakewalk for him. The girls stayed quiet, but their continued glares told him they could still blow at any time if he didn't tread carefully.

"Actually, it seems her family situation is a little problematic. One of the teachers is worried."

Koutarou explained himself in a rather indirect fashion. It was currently lunch break and there were plenty of other students around besides just Kotori and Nalfa. He couldn't tell Kenji the exact truth even if he wanted to.

"So it's something serious, is it?"

Nevertheless, Kenji could grasp the gravity of the situation from Koutarou's tone of voice. He narrowed his eyes accordingly, making a face that indicated he was using his brain at full power.

This has to do with Kou's secret and something about Emily-chan's family. The teacher he mentioned is probably Matsuzaka-sensei, so the government is probably involved too. In other words, Emily-chan's family has something to do with the Forthorthe problem, so...

Koutarou usually only saw Kenji wear such an expression every now and then during baseball games, so to see it now, he knew Kenji understood the serious nature of what was at hand. Pleased, Koutarou smiled a bit and nodded.

"Yeah, so tell us what you know."

"Sure thing. I'd love nothing more than to help a cute girl out, you know?"

"N-Nii-san!"

"Calm down, Kotori! I don't think it's what it sounds like!"

Kenji proceeded to tell Koutarou and the others everything he knew about Emily, which only increased the tension between him and his little sister.

As it turned out, Kenji had quite a bit of information to share about Emily. He knew where she was born, what schools she'd gone to, her height, her weight, and even her measurements.

"N-Nii-san! Where on earth did you get that kind of information?!"

"I-It's not what you think, Kotori!"

"Then what *is* it, exactly?!"

"I have a friend who can tell someone's measurements just by looking at them!"

"You're friends with a pervert like that?!"

"Ah, crap... What have I done?"



The depth and accuracy of the info Kenji had on Emily surprised everyone present, but Koutarou asked him to focus on her family situation and what she was doing in Japan.

“I think she said she’s here because of her dad’s work or something.”

“Wait, Mackenzie, you actually talked to her?!”

“Yeah... Should I not have?”

“No, that’s great.”

“Oooh, Nii-san...”

“Now, now, Kotori!”

Having already chatted with Emily himself, Kenji knew that she’d come to Japan with her mother because of her father’s job. She’d enrolled at Harukaze High because of the increased security after the arrival of the Forthorthian transfer students, but based on the way she talked about it, she hadn’t had much say in the matter.

“Apparently they still don’t have anywhere to stay, so they’re living out of a hotel.”

“So they rushed to Japan despite their daughter being in the middle of her high school career, huh? Hmm...” Koutarou groaned.

“It does sound a little strange, no?” Kiriha chimed in.

Since they were in class around their other classmates, Kiriha was still playing the part of an honor student. Nevertheless, she was as quick-witted as ever.

“Considering the timing, he could have either left his family behind or waited to make the move,” she pointed out.

“And if he knew he was going to be here a while, it would’ve made all the sense in the world to make the arrangements ahead of time, too... Something doesn’t add up,” Koutarou mused.

“There may be complicated circumstances at play. We’ll need to be duly vigilant.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Kiriha-san.”

There were too many unanswered questions regarding Professor Brown's arrival in Japan, so Koutarou and the girls decided to focus on what the professor was presently up to.

"Did she say anything else about her dad, Mackenzie?"

"She said that he must be busy with work because he still hasn't come back to the hotel."

It had already been a few days since the Browns had arrived in Japan, but the professor's family hadn't seen him since. Connecting the dots, Koutarou could only assume that he was hard at work analyzing Forthorthian tech. Perhaps the company he was working for was aware the Sun Rangers were onto them. Or perhaps they were just desperate to get a leg up on their competitors.

"Did she say anything about how her family gets along?"

"It sounded like they're close to me. I think she misses her dad, though. She kept saying she was worried about him and that she hopes he'll come home soon. That kind of stuff."

"Thanks. That's all great information... but something still feels off."

With Kenji as an informant, Koutarou was able to learn most everything he would've asked Emily directly. But it still wasn't enough to get a handle on the situation. The next step would be investigating Professor Brown himself.

"Anyways, Mackenzie, I mean it. You've been a big help."

"No prob. Should I keep in touch with Emily-chan?"

"Please do. And try to help her out if you have to."

"...You mean something might happen?"

"It's not out of the question, but things are complicated."

"Jeez, Kou. Now, as for my payment..."

"What?"

"Help me pacify Kotori."

"Okay, but just this once."

Before he could get to Professor Brown, Koutarou would have to help console poor Kotori, who was currently in tears after hearing how terrible her brother really was with her own ears.

Leaving Emily to Kenji, Koutarou and company decided to pursue Professor Brown. But until they could put their finger on what exactly seemed so strange about his circumstances, they'd have to tread lightly.

"Satomi-kun, the professor's leaving now just like the Sun Rangers said he would," reported Maki via Koutarou's bracelet.

She and Sanae had been watching the front entrance while Koutarou and Harumi were keeping an eye on the back of the building where he worked. They'd decided to split up into teams of two, each with someone who could use magic and someone who could use psychic powers, believing that would give them the most mobility and utility in terms of tailing someone. Ruth had unmanned crafts overhead to serve as backup. Everyone else was stationed nearby in case of an emergency, but they were lying low in order not to stand out and draw attention to themselves. Maki, Sanae, Harumi, and Koutarou were the main detail on this operation.

"Is this really how he's spending his days?" Koutarou wondered aloud.

That was yet another part of the equation that puzzled him. According to the Sun Rangers' intelligence, Professor Brown left the research institute around 5 PM to have a quick meal at a nearby family restaurant. Since it was just before the dinner rush, there were never many customers, and he always sat in the same spot. He'd done the same thing each and every day since coming to Japan, which was why the Sun Rangers already had his schedule down to a T even though they hadn't been able to launch a proper investigation.

"Could this be a trap, Satomi-kun?"

After hearing Maki's report, Harumi's first suspicion was foul play. If the professor was intentionally doing the same thing day in and day out, perhaps he was trying to get a lead on anyone who might be tailing him—just like Koutarou and the girls were right now.

"Senpai's right. Stay on your toes, Aika-san, Sanae. This might be a trap."

Koutarou knew Harumi's concerns were valid. Regardless of what was really at play, it would do them no harm to remain vigilant and prepared for the worst.

"Okay, then I'll conceal us with magic... Actually, hang on, Satomi-kun. Higashihongan-san wants to say something."

"Koutarou, Koutarou! That stubbly guy has been focused on something this entire time."

"Can you tell what he's thinking about?"

"Not clearly... but he's not aggressive. Really, kinda the opposite."

From a distance, Sanae could only get a vague read on Professor Brown's aura. That was enough, however, to tell her that he didn't mean any harm. She could also tell that his feelings were static, indicating he was fixated on something.

"The opposite?"

If he wasn't aggressive, that meant he was defensive. But if he'd intentionally laid a trap, there should be some degree of aggression tainting his aura. So if what Sanae said was true, that scenario suddenly seemed less likely.

"Good job, Sanae. Thanks for telling me."

"Eeheehee!"

"But we haven't learned anything yet, so let's keep tailing him. If you can manage to get close and get a better read, we're counting on you, Sanae."

"Leave it to me!"

It was still too early to jump to conclusions. There was too much they didn't understand yet. But they didn't let that discourage them. The operation had only just begun.

Professor Brown wasn't particularly mindful of his surroundings as he made his way to the usual family restaurant using the shortest route possible. Sanae used this opportunity to close in on him, continuing to observe his aura.

“It hasn’t changed. He’s still thinking about the same thing... But I think he might be praying?”

“Praying?”

“Yeah. It’s like he feels isolated or something. Cornered, maybe...”

Now that she was closer to her target, Sanae managed to glean some more detailed information.

Why would he be praying at a time like this?

Koutarou took a moment to add up everything Sanae had said so far in his head. If Professor Brown was on the defensive, if he felt isolated or cornered, and if he was praying... Perhaps he was asking for protection.

Does he think he’s being targeted? Or is it for some other reason...?

Koutarou continued to turn gears as he walked along, but he didn’t have much time to think. The professor quickly reached his destination: a high-rise building that housed the family restaurant he frequented on the second floor.

“We’ll go in first. Aika-san, Sanae, you two stick to the plan.”

“Be careful, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou and Harumi pretended to be on a date, discretely waiting about half a minute before following the professor into the restaurant so as not to be too obvious.

“Heehee...”

As they passed through the automatic door, however, Harumi let out a muffled giggle.

“Senpai?”

“I’m sorry. It’s nothing. I was just thinking that it’s a shame to do this looking this way,” Harumi said with a wry smile.

She’d used her magic to disguise herself and Koutarou, so they presently both looked like strangers to one another. Harumi had been looking forward to her faux date with Koutarou, so she was honestly a little disappointed.

“I know what you mean. I’d much prefer to be here under different

circumstances,” laughed Koutarou.

“But alas,” said Harumi, “we have a job to do.”

There, she took Koutarou’s arm. Pretending to be a couple right now wasn’t just for fun. It was part of the job Harumi had mentioned. But still, even disguised, there was no denying the blue ribbon dangling from her wrist.

“R-Right.”

“Teeheehee...”

Koutarou stared at Harumi in surprise for a moment before she scooted closer and leaned on him a little. He said absolutely nothing in response. Acting like a normal couple was part of their disguise, so he had no reason to push her away. Arm in arm, they waited for a waitress to show them to a table. They strategically asked for a spot in the no-smoking section by the window, which conveniently put them at the table directly behind the professor’s. They sat down across from each other, however, meaning Harumi had to reluctantly let go of Koutarou’s arm. Koutarou thought it was cute, but he also thought it was a shame he couldn’t see her real face right now.

“You certainly look like you’re enjoying yourself, Veltlion.”

Before he knew it, Clan’s unhappy voice was ringing through his earpiece. She and the others had heard their entire conversation.

“I’ll field any complaints at a later date. What’s going on?”

Koutarou normally would’ve been in for an earful at this juncture, but he preemptively put a stop to that and got straight down to business as he whispered into the microphone hidden in his collar. With Professor Brown right behind him, he couldn’t afford to draw any undue attention to himself. Clan realized the delicacy of the situation and immediately calmed herself.

“Well, Veltlion, we’ve thoroughly surveyed the surrounding area and identified two people we believe to be the professor’s guards: one at the front entrance and one at the back. But don’t worry. They didn’t seem to think anything of you two entering the restaurant.”

“Got it. Good work.”

“Still, please be careful.”

“I will.”

After signing off with Clan, Koutarou looked up at Harumi. She’d been listening in as well and gave Koutarou a small nod to let him know.

“Senpai, what do you want to eat?”

“Hmm, I’m feeling something really cheesy today.”

Harumi and Koutarou chatted about the menu, keeping up their charade as a couple. The other team still hadn’t made their entrance, and they couldn’t do anything until then.

“Satomi-kun, we’re at the restaurant now.”

“Koutarou, can I order cake?!”

Maki and Sanae showed up shortly after Koutarou and Harumi ordered their food. They too were in disguise, appearing as girls from a different school.

“If you do your job, you can have as much cake as you want.”

“You bet I will! That cake is mine!”

The disguised Sanae and Maki took a seat across the restaurant, but their abilities made it easy to communicate even from a distance. It wasn’t long, however, before Ruth also joined the conversation.

“Master, I have something to report,” she said through Koutarou’s earpiece.

Ruth was in control of several drones circling overhead, and it seemed one of them had picked up on something that got her attention.

“Go ahead.”

“We’re recording Professor Brown through the window from the outside. He’s mouthing something, so we enhanced the video feed to read his lips and have the message translated. He appears to be saying: ‘I don’t care if it’s God or the devil. If these words reach you, please help me.’”

“It’s just as Sanae suspected... But what does it mean?”

Sanae had guessed the professor might be praying, but those words weren’t a

prayer so much as they were a cry for help—and it sounded like he was willing to take it from anyone. Koutarou couldn't help wondering what that meant, but Kiriha had an idea.

“Koutarou, can you hear the professor from where you're sitting?” she asked.

“No, I can't. Is he still moving his mouth?”

Koutarou's senses were enhanced far beyond a normal human's thanks to the psychic powers Sanae had wired in him. But even with his keen ears, he couldn't hear the professor's voice. It wasn't even registering on his bracelet.

“Yes, he still seems to be mouthing something. But if you take into consideration his seat...”

“His seat?”

“He took a table by the window, but the guards can't see him from where he's sitting. So if he's intentionally mouthing something by the window, we can only assume he meant for someone like us to see him.”

“What?!”

Kiriha's theory was that the professor was trying to communicate with someone. He always sat at a window table in a second-floor restaurant where he would be out of view of the guards following him. At best, they'd only be able to see the top of his head from the street. And it was from this table that the professor silently faced the window and mouthed a desperate message every day. So if he wasn't trying to reach a higher power, the professor's only hope would be someone with advanced technology keeping an eye on him from outside.

“The professor is a smart man, however. I'm sure he knows that the chances of anyone actually observing him with the means of intuiting his message are quite slim. He's not doing this with any conviction that it'll actually work. He's only doing it out of hope that it will. That being the case, I think it's fair to assume the professor is in danger. That is, of course, if this isn't a trap.”

If this wasn't a trap, then logical Professor Brown had been reduced to extraordinarily impractical means of asking for help. And he wasn't asking for help from just anyone. It would take a high degree of tech and savvy for

someone to be able to figure him out. If he'd set his standards that high, there was reason enough to assume that he was in serious danger and he needed serious help to get out of it.

Then the question is... Does he really need help or is this a trap?

Hearing Kiriha's explanation, Koutarou realized the potentially dire nature of the situation. He couldn't discount the possibility that this was a trap, however. That left him with a decision to make: should they contact the professor in spite of the risks? Koutarou wasn't eager to waltz into a trap, but if the professor really was in danger, wasting any more time could be fatal.

"Satomi-kun, I think Kiriha-san is right," said Maki.

"He's real worried about someone close to him. I think that's why he wants help," added Sanae.

The other girls adding their two cents went a long way with Koutarou. Maki was an adept magician whose specialty was mind manipulation magic, and Sanae could readily read other people's feelings with her psychic powers. If both of them agreed with Kiriha's theory, then Professor Brown really was in trouble.

With all signs indicating that Professor Brown was desperate for help, Koutarou and the girls agreed to try establishing contact. They decided to use magic for the job, believing it would be safer than using technology right now.

"Think you can do it, Aika-san?"

"I think it'll work. He's quite receptive to someone reaching out to him right now."

Using magic to establish a mental link between two people normally only worked with allies. There needed to be some kind of connection between both parties already. Trying to use it on a stranger typically failed, but Professor Brown was a special case. He was opening himself up to communication, making it easier for Maki to magically get in touch with him.

"All right, Satomi-kun. I've cast the spell."

“...Professor Brown, can you hear me?”

Normally there was no need to actually speak with magical communication, but Koutarou did so anyway because it was easier for him to focus that way. Maki then took what he said, translated it into English, and passed it directly into Professor Brown’s mind—an extra measure she took for caution’s sake.

“Wh-Who’s voice is that?!”

Hearing a strange voice in his mind, Professor Brown nearly jumped up out of his seat in surprise. But he said not a word. Not out loud, at least. He was all too keenly aware of the position he was in.

“Please calm down, Professor Brown. We can hear your thoughts.”

“You mean you’re reading my mind?!”

“Yes. But unfortunately, I’m not God or the devil.”

“You’re not God or the devil...? You mean you picked up on my message? Just who are you?!”

“I can’t tell you that yet. Where exactly you stand is still unclear to us.”

“Th-That’s fair... Just a moment, please.”

Realizing how shaken this sudden development had left him, the professor took a deep breath to calm himself. His actions spoke volumes to his mental fortitude and quick thinking. Enemy or not, Koutarou could tell just how remarkable the professor was.

“I don’t have much time, so I’ll make this quick... My family is being held hostage and I’m being forced to help analyze Forthorthian technology. I need assistance to escape.”

“I see.”

It finally made sense. Something had continually seemed strange about Professor Brown’s behavior because he was being forced to act against his will.

“Koutarou, I don’t think he’s lying. His aura is calm, if a little flustered.”

“I’m of the same opinion. His subconscious indicates the same emotions he’s betraying on the surface.”

Sanae and Maki combined could tell what the professor was thinking and feeling. All signs indicated he was being honest.

“I understand your situation now. We’re striving to prevent Forthorthian technology from falling into the wrong hands, so I think we can work together.”

Koutarou decided to cooperate with the professor, but knowing things could still go awry, he withheld his identity.

“You’re going to help me?!”

“I hope that we can, so please give us more details.”

“Thank god! But I’m out of time for now. I’m leaving a memory card behind in my seat. It’s something I prepared ahead of time in the case anyone ever answered me... Please take a look at it.”

A scant five or ten minutes wasn’t nearly enough time for the professor to explain his situation. And if he took too long, the guards would come looking for him. Having already taken all this into account, Professor Brown had compiled all of the relevant data on a memory card.

Considering his brainpower, it’s no wonder the corporation wanted him to analyze the tech...

Koutarou was convinced. This was the kind of meticulous thoughtfulness and attention to detail one needed to take full advantage of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. If he himself had technology to analyze, he’d definitely want someone like Professor Brown on his team.

“Understood. We’ll speak again tomorrow.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to a positive response.”

And so their first encounter with Professor Brown came to an end. It had been brief, but they were able to get what they needed. What happened next would depend on the contents of the memory card.

The data on the memory card was password encrypted, leaving Koutarou and the girls at something of a loss. Professor Brown hadn’t shared the password with them. Clan was prepared to use a Forthorthian computer to brute-force

her way to the data, but someone else managed to crack the code before she got a chance.

“How about this?!”

Shizuka rhythmically tapped away at the keyboard, happily punching the enter key at the end with far more force than necessary.

“All right! I got it!” she declared, pointing to the screen with a big smile on her face.

“Really?!” exclaimed Koutarou.

He looked to the computer in excitement, and sure enough, Shizuka was right. It had accepted the password and was now decoding the contained files to bring them up for viewing.

“What was the password, Landlord-san?” he asked.

“It was ‘I don’t care if it’s God or the devil.’ This kind of riddle-solving is pretty common in books, you know,” Shizuka boasted as everyone gathered around her.

She enjoyed reading mystery and adventure novels, so she was familiar with this kind of puzzle. That said, she’d managed to guess the password on what was practically pure intuition. Though Kiriha was a little slower to the punch, she explained the solution to the rest of the group.

“The fact that he didn’t tell us the password meant that we should already know it. It had to be something anyone who contacted the professor would know, meaning the answer was simple. This was why he had us read his lips.”

Professor Brown’s prayer was the key to unlocking his files, which were ready for viewing a minute or so after Shizuka typed in the password.

“Would you mind, Ruth?” Koutarou asked.

“Leave it to me,” she replied readily.

Koutarou and company were currently using the highest-tech computer they had access to: the one in the Hazy Moon’s laboratory. It of course belonged to Clan, but Ruth didn’t hesitate to sit down and use it herself, bringing up the files on a holographic screen so that everyone could see them.

“...So Emily-san and her mom are hostages? No wonder the professor is doing everything they say. That explains why his behavior seemed so odd.”

Professor Brown’s family was being used against him. That was the whole reason for his sudden move to Japan in the first place. That much made sense to Koutarou.

“Strictly speaking, his wife is being confined while Emily is being monitored at all times. Perhaps going through Mackenzie instead of contacting Emily ourselves was the right choice,” mused Theia.

Professor Brown was currently working at one of Bell-Tesla Electronics’ research facilities, but not by choice. It was only to keep his family safe.

The professor’s wife, Claire, was confined to her hotel room, completely cut off from the outside world. Their daughter, Emily, was attending Kisshouharukaze High School, but company watchdogs calling themselves guards kept a constant eye on her. If Koutarou and the others had contacted her directly, it likely would’ve put the company on high alert. In that regard, Kenji approaching Emily so naturally and casually was a genuine blessing.

As for the professor, he was being kept away from his family. He was allowed to call and email them, but Bell-Tesla Electronics—popularly known as BTE—monitored all of their contact, making it impossible for them to coordinate an escape. That’s why the best the professor had been able to do was hope someone like Koutarou and company would appear.

“Let’s see. The professor is currently researching...” mumbled Clan as she scanned the data onscreen. “Oh no, they have an entire intact navigation device!”

Said navigation device was one of the ship parts the Sun Rangers hadn’t been able to track down yet, and it was a particularly dangerous part to have fall into the wrong hands. Once analyzed, it could reveal the secrets of space distortion, which would open the floodgates to an entirely new field of technology that hadn’t previously existed on Earth. This was terrible news. Since the ship had self-destructed, Koutarou and company hadn’t expected to find any of the parts whole and unscathed. And unfortunately, someone else had found this one before them.

“Ruth-san, let the Sun Rangers know we found the navigation device!” Koutarou shouted.

“Right away!” Ruth replied instantaneously.

“This is the worst possible scenario... I now understand why the professor was being so cautious,” Kiriha said with a bitter expression as she crossed her arms.

Considering the situation, they wouldn’t get a second chance if they screwed this up. The professor could only cooperate with them once. And if things fell through, the price would be high. The professor, his family, and the navigation device would all disappear forever.

“This means that we’ll need to nab the professor, his wife, his daughter, and the navigation device all in one fell swoop... And it’s not going to be easy,” Koutarou observed with a grimace.

Collecting four different, strictly-guarded objectives at the same time was going to be a difficult task, even for the likes of Koutarou and the girls.

“What do we do, Koutarou?” asked Sanae, a bit nervous.

“Well, we’re just gonna have to save them,” he replied unflinchingly.

“Yeah!”

Koutarou had his mind made up from the start. He knew the path he needed to walk, and he wasn’t going to abandon it just because it would be difficult. After fighting alongside Alaia, his sense of responsibility was unshakeable.

The next day, Koutarou and the girls psychically contacted Professor Brown again to let him know of their plans to rescue him and his family, as well as to recover the navigation device. They also informed him they were working on behalf of Forthorthe, though the professor had no way of confirming that. He would have to decide for himself whether or not he trusted them.

“All right... I’m going to wager on you guys.”

And in the end, he decided to take a chance. It was better than nothing in his current situation. Even if Koutarou and company turned out to be part of another evil corporation, two sides clashing over him was better than being

monopolized. It could lead to information leaks and big changes. There was even a possibility that the government would take notice if things escalated to that level.

“Thank you, professor. All that’s left is for us to prove ourselves.”

“I’m delighted. I... Well, I’ve done what I can on my end. All I can offer you now is prayer. I’ll beseech both our Holy Father and Forthorthe’s goddess on your behalf.”

“I’d appreciate that. I tend to have some rotten luck.”

“Hahaha, you’re an interesting man, you know that? I’m looking forward to getting to meet you.”

“Likewise. Well, until then, professor...”

After their secret liaison with Professor Brown, Koutarou and company made their way back to the Hazy Moon. They’d gotten new information from the professor that they’d need to take into account before beginning the operation.

The new information the professor had surrendered concerned his wife, Claire. He’d managed to gather bits and pieces of intelligence by eavesdropping on the guards. So far, he’d only been able to determine the name and location of the hotel where she was being held, but that was enough for Koutarou and the girls. They were quickly able to figure out the exact room by checking the hotel’s security cameras remotely.

“The fourteenth-floor penthouse of the Traditional Kisshou, is it?”

Kiriha was looking up at a holographic screen with a somewhat stern expression. Claire was confined to room 1401, which was the most luxurious suite in the entire hotel. It was a VIP suite, so it was designed with security in mind. And that was precisely why Kiriha looked so severe at the moment.

“You see the bad guys treat hostages hospitably in movies every now and then... I guess that happens in real life too,” Maki remarked in surprise, looking at a hotel brochure.

Pictures of the penthouse featured a crystal chandelier, antique furniture, and

silk linens. They were luxury accommodations in anyone's book and came with a price tag to match.

"I don't think it's as much about hospitality as it is practicality," said Kiriha. "The wife and her guards are together, after all."

"I see. That does make sense," said Maki with a nod.

As the master suite of the hotel, room 1401 had multiple bedrooms within. That allowed both Claire and her guards some privacy. (They had discussions they didn't want her to overhear, after all.) So between being spacious and defensible, the penthouse was ideal.

"Well, what are you thinking, Kiriha?"

Theia, who was currently looking at schematics for the suite, was ready to start talking about a plan. As battle-oriented as she was, she'd already formulated a few strategies in her head and wanted to know how they checked out against Kiriha's.

"We'll need several people. Six at the least."

Looking at the layout of the penthouse—which consisted of one large living area and two bedrooms—Kiriha surmised that there would be four guards. After factoring in their different equipment and abilities as well as the pros and cons of offensive and defensive tactics, Kiriha concluded that they'd need at least six people on the operation. Seven or eight would be better if they wanted complete assurance.

"I agree. Whether we attack head on or sneak in, we'll need at least that many people on the job. The problem is that we'll need even more to rescue the professor and Emily too."

Between Koutarou and the girls, they had a team of ten to divide up however they needed. But if rescuing Claire took six people, then that only left four of them to go after the professor and Emily. That would be a struggle, and the frown on Theia's face said she knew it.

"Let's ask the Sun Rangers for help. They have their hands full, but considering the importance of this operation, they should at least be able to lend us their support," suggested Kiriha.

The Sun Rangers were currently working on tracking down and retrieving the missing ship parts. But considering an intact navigation device was easily the most pressing part of all, they should be willing to spare what resources they could to help with the operation. Even a few extra hands could make all the difference.

“Then we need to decide on a plan of attack,” said Koutarou, who’d only been silently listening in so far. He wasn’t much help in the planning and logistics stages of an attack, but the attack itself was his forte. Pulling together his thoughts on the matter, he shared them with the group. “The professor wants us to prioritize his family, so we should focus on rescuing Claire-san and Emily-san at the same time. Then we’ll get the professor and the part.”

When it came to Claire and Emily, it was paramount that they be rescued together. Once one of them disappeared, BTE security would be on high alert. If they still had one of the women in their clutches when that happened, the situation could get ugly.

That went for the professor as well, but there was no getting around the fact that his family needed to be extracted first. Moreover, he had an additional level of security that his wife and daughter didn’t. He was useful, after all. It would cost BTE dearly if they decided to get rid of him.

But most of all, Koutarou wanted to respect the professor’s wishes. Professor Brown’s top priority was his family, and Koutarou planned accordingly. They would retrieve Claire and Emily before swiftly moving on to the professor.

“That won’t be easy,” said Theia. “A double rescue will be twice as noticeable.”

“Indeed,” agreed Kiriha. “We’ll probably need some kind of cover. A ruse that would let us come into contact with Claire and Emily would be ideal.”

Realizing the monumental nature of the task in front of them, Theia and Kiriha began discussing ways to make Koutarou’s plan a reality. In terms of efficiency, it would be better to go straight for the professor and the part. That would give them the highest chances of success and assure that they could prevent the navigation technology from being leaked. But both girls knew that wasn’t the route Koutarou wanted to take, so neither voiced a complaint.

“Koutarou, do you think Kenji would cooperate with us?” Kiriha asked.

“I think he’ll end up helping on his own even if I don’t say anything,” Koutarou answered honestly.

“Then I’ll take that into consideration.”

“...”

“Ruth-san, I know what you want to say. I really do, but try to hold it in. Let’s leave that to Kin-chan, okay?”

“...”

Certain parties had objections to the plan, but it was gradually taking shape as Theia and Kiriha worked out the details.

“To be honest, I’m glad Satomi-kun isn’t like that...”

“Shizuka-sama, if Master were that kind of man, I’d bite my tongue and die.”

Overhearing the girls, Koutarou couldn’t help muttering an apology to his absent best friend.

“Sorry, Mackenzie...”

Kenji’s reputation was in a free fall, but it wasn’t as important as the safety of the professor and his family right now.

With the plan decided, Koutarou and the girls proceeded with preparations. They needed to gather the necessary gear, check out the relevant locations, and so on. Koutarou was assigned the job of scouting where they planned to rescue the professor. Since they would rendezvous there after rescuing Claire and Emily, it would be the most dangerous part of the operation. They’d have to be thorough and careful.

“This place is older than I thought,” said Koutarou when he saw the building.

“It’s apparently a factory belonging to an affiliated corporation. Only the above-ground portion is supposedly running now, but during the bubble, the entire basement was in use too.”

Koutarou was currently outside an old factory with Maki. Her indigo magic

made her an ideal partner for scouting operations like this.

“So the research facility is occupying the basement now?”

“It seems so. The rest of the factory is more or less being used as a front.”

The BTE research facility they were investigating was situated below the factory. The factory itself had no direct financial ties to BTE. Its owners hadn't even had any recent dealings with BTE, but they did have quite a history together. Several large deals in the past had established a long-lasting friendship between the two companies, which was why BTE had chosen this location for their facility. Incidentally, this was all information Professor Brown had turned over to Koutarou and the girls when he told them about his wife.

“It seems BTE arranged the use of the facility by baiting the factory owners with a new contract just as business was dwindling. Production's not set to start for a while though...”

“I guess it was an offer they couldn't refuse. That's too bad...”

Koutarou and Maki were observing the factory from the shadows, comparing it to the blueprints they'd gotten from the Sun Rangers. It was a mostly concrete building with several metal pipes protruding from various locations, and the entire facility was surrounded by a tall wall. But even with the wall in the way, the mechanical sounds of the factory still reached Koutarou and Maki. Much like the building, the machinery contained within was showing its age.

“Anyways... I'm counting on you, Aika-san.”

“Of course. Keen Sense. Clairvoyance.”

There, Maki cast two spells on Koutarou. One enhanced his senses and the other let him see through physical objects. His vision was already quite sharp thanks to the psychic powers he'd gotten from Sanae, so he was able to see straight inside the factory from where he was standing with Maki's magical help.

“There's been some remodeling, but it mostly follows the blueprints.”

Koutarou marked the relevant updates on the map at hand. They were from the building's construction years ago, meaning they were somewhat outdated.

There were a few new hallways and a few partitions that had been knocked down to make them—exactly the kind of details that would be critical to know during a rescue operation.

“What about the basement?”

“It’s too deep for me to be able to see it clearly. The best I can get through the ground is a glimpse of the top.”

“Maybe we should ask Clan-san to send in a reconnaissance drone later.”

“I can’t wait to hear her yell about that...”

The thicker something was, the harder it was for the clairvoyance spell to penetrate it. The walls of the building were no obstacle, but the basement was beneath several meters of dirt and concrete. In reality, hiding things underground was a simple and effective way of concealing them from such magic. Detecting them there would be much easier with technology, but their technological go-to had gotten a little fussy recently about being asked to use such shady tactics. Koutarou could already see the face she was going to make when he asked her to do it.

“You just need to tell her that you need her, Satomi-kun.”

“...Is there any other way?”

Koutarou could never bring himself to be honest with Clan, and he actually enjoyed getting under her skin and seeing her flustered. It made it all too easy to tease her.

“Why can’t you say it to Clan-san? You say it to me.”

“That’s because you need to hear it, Aika-san.”

“Clan-san needs to hear it too, you know? Really, we all do now.”

In Maki’s eyes, Koutarou was naive. The girls around him all knew how they felt, and they all knew what they wanted from Koutarou. That manifested differently from girl to girl, be it a desire for playing, fighting, or something else. But in the end, they all really wanted the same thing... They wanted Koutarou to be honest with them.

“I’ll try my best to, you know... say something nice.”

“I think you should.”

Even the dense Koutarou had come to realize the changes happening around him. The girls had a firm grasp on his heart, and their grip was far too tight for him to shake it off now. He knew that better than anyone, but pretended not to. His pride as a man got in the way of accepting it in earnest.

“Enough of that. We have work to do.”

“Heehee.”

Maki couldn't help giggling as she lovingly touched the headphones hanging from her neck. Shizuka had told her once that a good woman didn't prod a man too much, and Maki figured now would be a good time to put that advice to practice. Besides, they did indeed have work to do.

“Satomi-kun, that car's worth a lot, isn't it?”

“That one? Yeah, it's an expensive model. And there's two of them here. Maybe Bell-Tesla Electronics people are here.”

“If they brought two cars, there's probably between five and eight of them. Maybe they're here to put together some experimental equipment.”

Koutarou and Maki scrutinized the factory, poring through every detail to learn anything they could about their enemy. It was dull, tedious work, but they were building the foundation for a successful operation. Koutarou was used to this kind of thing from scouting opposing teams and whatnot back in his baseball days. And as a former member of a militant organization, Maki had plenty of experience in recon. So the two of them quietly went about their work without complaint.

“Hwah?!”

Or so it went until Maki suddenly let out a wild gasp. When Koutarou turned to look at her, she began rubbing her wide eyes.

“What's wrong?”

“Satomi-kun, look over there!”

“Over there? What's...”

Maki was pointing to the back door of the factory. Someone was pushing a handcart loaded down with several plastic trash bags. Based on their uniform, it appeared to be a factory employee... But Koutarou knew that face.



“Th-That’s Yurika!”

“I thought so!”

“Wait a minute! Were we supposed to infiltrate the factory?!”

“We didn’t make any plans like that!”

If there had been plans for an infiltration, then Koutarou and Maki’s scouting trip would’ve been wholly unnecessary.

“So what’s she doing here?!”

“Well, today, Yurika was...”

There, Maki went agape. Koutarou peered at her with a puzzled look, unsure of what was happening. When she realized that Koutarou was in the dark, Maki pulled herself together and answered his silent question in a parched voice.

“Y-Yurika said she was working today...”

“Damn it! How does she always end up working as an evil underling?!”

Koutarou whipped out his phone and immediately gave Yurika a call. While it was ringing, he remembered that he’d talked with Yurika about her new part-time job at a factory. She said she’d learned from her past mistakes and chosen a respectable local business to work for. She hadn’t been wrong... just very unlucky this time. Koutarou knew that, but he couldn’t help the harshness in his voice.

“Hello, hello! You’ve reached Yurika!”

“It’s me!”

“Wha? Satomi-san?”

“Don’t ask questions! Just come out the back!”

“Huh? I’m getting a weird sense of deja vu...”

Yurika left her handcart and followed Koutarou’s instructions, leaving the factory grounds through the back gate. When she arrived, Koutarou and Maki stepped out from the shadows to greet her.

“What are you doing in a place like this?!”

“That’s my line! What are you and Maki-chan doing here? Wait, d-don’t tell me...”

That’s when it struck her. Her sense of deja vu was because this had happened before. At her previous job, no less. And when that realization set in, a chill ran down Yurika’s spine.

“It’s exactly what you think it is. This factory is being used as a front for the professor’s research.”

“Nuuuuu!”

Yurika defiantly shook her head, her long twintails flipping about behind her. She’d been playing with Sanae during the strategy meeting, so this was all news to her. News that wasn’t easy to hear.

“Manager Yoshiwara is a master! He can tell if things are uneven just by touching them! He’s even better than a machine and can level things in an instant! All the apprentices like him too! He’s not a bad guy!”

Yurika’s new job seemed to be a nice place. Everyone was hardworking and kind. They took good care of newbies like Yurika and made her feel like part of the team as they watched over her. She couldn’t believe they were up to anything bad.

“That’s the problem! A master craftsman and his team are being used for evil!”

The tight-knit nature of the factory, however, had backfired on them. Even with production dwindling, they couldn’t bring themselves to let go of any of their employees. They were just barely scraping by, and that’s where BTE came in. The big contract dangling in front of the factory would allow them to keep everyone on board with a raise and even hire new staff, so they were willing to let BTE do whatever they wanted in the basement.

“Waaaaah! Don’t tell me I’ve been working for nothing again!”

That was the real reason Yurika couldn’t bring herself to accept the truth. She was paid daily at her last job, so she’d only missed out on a single day’s pay when the company was busted. But at the factory, she only got paid once a month, meaning her losses would be much greater.

“Sorry, Yurika.”

“Can’t we at least push the plan back until after payday?!”

Payday was the 25th of every month, which was still a couple of weeks out. There was no way they could delay the plan that long. Yurika knew that in her heart of hearts, but had to ask anyway. She already knew what she wanted to spend her paycheck on.

“Like I said... Sorry, Yurika.”

“Nooooooooooo!”

With that, Yurika broke down crying on the spot. Magazine subscriptions, new manga, merchandise from an anime that had premiered in the spring, and the Blu-ray releases of a few movies she’d missed while in Forthorthe... All gone, just like that.

Yurika’s workplace had once again turned out to be a den of evil. This was devastating to her, but the others weren’t especially surprised.

“And that’s what I heard about the basement from Yurika,” reported Harumi.

A hologram of the basement was displayed behind her. It was a 3D model that Clan had made while listening to her report. Such a feat was easy for her in the Hazy Moon’s conference room.

“It seems the basement’s more complicated than we thought. It’s fortunate Yurika’s been working there,” Kiriha commented.

Thanks to Yurika, they’d gotten free insider information in a most casual fashion. They wouldn’t even need to send in a reconnaissance drone now. Like Kiriha said, it was a rather fortunate turn of events.

“And what about Yurika?” Theia asked.

“She’s in bed. It seems that finding out she was a henchman again came as quite a shock...” Harumi said forlornly.

As her best friend, it had fallen on Harumi to get the information out of Yurika. But not even the sweet Harumi could console Yurika right now. The matter of her paycheck was bad enough, but finding out she’d been playing the

part of an evil henchman again wounded her pride as a magical girl. This was a nightmare for Yurika, and she didn't know how else to deal with it other than hiding in bed after she told Harumi everything she knew about the basement. With her lifestyle and her pride both compromised, she was undoubtedly curled up in the wardrobe crying right about now.

"Koutarou, can't you do something? It was Yurika's fault before, but it wasn't this time, right?" Theia asked.

"...But what am I supposed to do?"

"Satomi-kun, please! I can't stand seeing Yurika like this... It's totally different from when she sulks after you yell at her!" Shizuka begged.

"Landlord-san..."

With both Sanae and Shizuka pleading, Koutarou started thinking. As he did, the other girls began looking to him as well. It seemed they all felt the same way.

It's true this was just bad luck...

Thinking about it calmly, he knew this incident wasn't Yurika's fault. It wasn't like she'd jumped for the highest bidder. She'd carefully considered her employment options, picked a job she thought would be honest labor, and been working hard ever since. No one could've known BTE was scheming at a local factory.

Moreover, the girls are right... I hate to see her like this...

Koutarou's thoughts turned to Yurika's crying eyes. He didn't like seeing her sad, so he wanted to do what he could to cheer her up.

"I'll think of something."

"Attaboy, Koutarou!"

"Thank you, Satomi-kun."

Yurika and Sanae were constant sources of energy for the entire group. With Yurika down and out, they all were in a way. Koutarou couldn't stand for that.

Confession Under the Bridge

Sunday, May 15th

Yurika had once again become an evil henchman. As a magical girl and ally of justice, this discovery was no small shock. Koutarou used every method he could to console her, but nothing worked for days. And before he knew it, it was time for the sports festival.

“Ah, so that’s why Nijino-san’s been looking so down.”

Hearing the story from Koutarou, Kenji nodded. He’d been wondering about her all this time. Even now, she was wandering around like a zombie.

“It wasn’t her fault this time and I want to do something for her, but... turns out that’s harder than it sounds.”

Koutarou let out a sigh as he stretched to warm up. In just a few minutes, the interclub obstacle marathon would begin. He was desperate to cheer her up before then.

“So, Mackenzie... What do you think I should do?”

Koutarou had been friends with Yurika for a long time and knew a lot about her, but this was a special case and he wasn’t well equipped for handling such situations. That’s why he’d turned to his best friend and resident girl expert, Kenji.

“That’s easy. Just embrace her and give her a kiss.”

“Anything except that.”

“Why are you trying to make this harder on yourself, Kou?”

“I’m not. I mean it. Anything but that, seriously.”

“Hmm... How about tempting her with her favorite food?”

“That didn’t work. I mean, she’ll eat it, but she just goes back to moping. And

it doesn't matter how much I feed her, either."

"Then what about taking her out on a date?"

"I tried asking, but she's so glazed-over that it's like I can't even get through to her."

"Okay, then maybe you should try calling Nana-san for help?"

"She's in Forthorthe right now managing diplomatic relations between Forthorthe and her home country."

"Then I guess you're SOL."

"Don't say that! She's still working at her part-time job even though it's pro bono all because she knows the factory workers would be troubled if she suddenly quit."

When Koutarou and the others made their move to rescue the Brown family, there was a high chance the factory would fold in the aftermath. But Yurika was still working hard in spite of that. She knew her coworkers were counting on her right now, and she couldn't abandon them. But that only made her even more depressed. She knew what was going to happen and still couldn't save the innocent factory workers from misfortune. This was completely different from busting up a yakuza ring.

"Maybe I'll give Yurika an allowance and try to defend the factory to keep it from getting shut down... But someone's going to have to take responsibility for this."

That's why Koutarou was so fixated on Yurika. He knew she'd done and was still doing the right thing, and he hated to see her punished for that.

"Say, Kou... Why don't you just give it up?"

Kenji paused his warmup and adjusted his glasses as he looked at Koutarou. His best friend's quandary was amusing to him.

"What?"

"You don't want her to be upset or hurt... Simply put, you don't want her to be unhappy, right?"

“Yeah... I guess not.”

“But giving her an allowance and trying to keep her workplace from shutting down is way beyond the scope of a normal friendship.”

“Huh?”

“You follow me?”

“...”

That was when it hit Koutarou. He and the girls had always been helping each other out, and the degree of that help had gradually increased over time. He'd never realized it before, but it seemed so obvious now. Like Kenji said, that was way further than most people would go for a normal friend. It was the kind of thing you'd only do for someone special.

“You just can't leave Nijino-san alone... You can't leave any of those girls alone. So why don't you just give up on the idea of picking just one? It's a losing battle at this point, you know?”

No matter how anyone looked at it, there was a special bond between Koutarou and Yurika. One that drove them together and not apart in the face of misfortune. And it wasn't just them. A similar bond existed between Koutarou and the other girls, as well as between the girls themselves. That was plain as day to Kenji. He knew it would be impossible to break them up at this point.

“Shut up. I'm not going to do anything stupid.”

“Heh... Whatever you say, Kou.”

Kenji knew that hardheaded Koutarou could solve all the trouble he'd been having with the girls by settling on just one of them. But he also knew that if the girls took hands in a circle around him, Koutarou could never bring himself to hurt any of them. It was indeed a most amusing situation.

Koutarou had sidled up to Kenji before the race to ask for advice, but that wasn't his only reason. He could've done that anytime. There was something far more important at play.

“Mackenzie, it's almost time.”

“Yeah, I know. Have there been any changes?”

“Nothing as of yet... I’m counting on you for today, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah. A friend in need and all that.”

With a light shrug, Kenji walked off. The club obstacle marathon was just about to start, and Koutarou wasn’t who he’d be running with today.

“How are things with Kenji, Koutarou?”

As if to take Kenji’s place, Kiriha approached Koutarou. She was in charge of everything and was going around to each of her friends for a final check-in.

“He’s fine. The same as always. He’s got some guts, though. Maybe he’s more suited for this stuff than I am.”

“So Kenji’s personality is helping us out in more ways than one, is it?”

Satisfied with Koutarou’s report, Kiriha turned her gaze on Kenji. He’d walked away and was calling out to a tall, blonde girl. It was, of course, Professor Brown’s daughter. Kenji’s partner for the race was Emily.

“That said, I’d like to limit his involvement to this special case.”

“Definitely. He should stay on the sunny side of things.”

Kiriha and Koutarou agreed on that point. Just because Kenji had guts didn’t mean he should walk the same path they did. It would be better if he lived a normal life.

“Kou-niisan!”

“Hello, Koutarou-sama! Kiriha-sama!”

Their conversation, however, was interrupted when Kotori and Nalfa came running over. They were wearing runner’s bibs that identified them as part of the photography club.

“Here, Kou-niisan. These are the bibs for the knitting society.”

“Thanks for bringing them, Kin-chan.”

“It’s no big deal. Besides, we had ulterior motives.”

“Koutarou-sama, look this way!”

“Ah, so that’s what you mean.”

As Koutarou put on his bib, Nalfa snapped away. She and Kotori had specifically come over to get a picture of him wearing it.

“Like brother, like sister. You’re a clever girl, Kin-chan.”

“Teehee...”

Kotori was beaming with an embarrassed smile she only ever revealed to her closest friends. But catching sight of something out of the corner of her eye made it disappear in an instant.

“Nii-san... Again?!”

When Koutarou mentioned her brother, Kotori naturally glanced around for him... and saw him chatting up the new transfer student.

“When it comes to women, Matsudaira Kenji is a natural...”

Kiriha found herself groaning as well. They were too far away to hear what Kenji and Emily were talking about, but based on their body language, they were already quite close. Emily was even playfully punching Kenji in the chest. They’d only known each other a few days, but they were acting like old friends.

Since Emily had moved to Japan in a hurry, her Japanese wasn’t very good. And since she’d moved halfway around the world, she didn’t know anyone here. It made her uneasy, especially with her current family situation. She felt like she didn’t have anyone to talk to... And that’s where Kenji walked in. He was sociable and fun. He even spoke English, but since it wasn’t his native language, he made mistakes from time to time just like she did in Japanese. It helped break the ice between them and they became fast friends. Since the other students weren’t great with English, Emily relied heavily on him. That was even why they were participating in the race together today. Kenji would stay by her side as her interpreter.

“I hate to say this about my own brother, but I don’t know if it’s amazing or shameful...”

Kotori was looking at Kenji, but she wasn’t angry this time. She’d heard he was helping Koutarou and the others, so she kept her fingers crossed that his

intentions were innocent.

“Either way, it’s thanks to him we can get her out of here,” Koutarou offered.

Today would be the day Koutarou and the girls rescued the Brown family. They’d entrusted Emily to Kenji so he could guide her to safety once the race started.

In order to pull off the difficult mission of rescuing the Brown family and securing the swiped navigation device as simultaneously as possible, Koutarou and the girls had decided to use the obstacle marathon to their advantage. They would make their move during the event, camouflaging the rescue among all the hubbub.

“Koutarou, there are three people with strange auras.”

“Master, I’ve located the three figures Sanae-sama is talking about on camera. I’m forwarding the information to your bracelet.”

“Thanks.”

When formulating their plan of attack, the biggest obstacle was how to rescue Emily. Emily’s mother, Claire, was confined to the hotel, so the only real question in her case was the matter of timing. But Emily could move freely, albeit under surveillance. That’s where Kenji came in; he would keep tabs on Emily and guide her to the target destination during the race. He would be the real linchpin of the operation.

I’m counting on you, Mackenzie. But to think the day would come that we’re all depending on you and your less-than-appreciated talents...

At first Koutarou and the girls had considered asking the Sun Rangers to call Emily to the office at a prearranged time, but that would be too obvious. It also might inadvertently lead to BTE security discovering the Sun Rangers since they would inevitably look into any teachers trying to make contact with Emily.

And that conundrum was where the idea of using the obstacle marathon came up. By doing some behind-the-scenes work to change the course of the race, they could basically guarantee Emily would be in a certain spot at a certain time. It wouldn’t even be suspicious. By all appearances, Emily would just be

participating in the marathon—and so would Koutarou and company. They'd all just be part of the event. It wasn't like BTE security could realistically look into every student, faculty member, and volunteer involved in the race.

With all that decided, the last remaining problem was their point of contact with Emily. From her point of view, she'd practically be getting kidnapped. Someone would need to be with her to convince her. And since Koutarou and the girls determined no one else could win Emily's trust before the sports festival, that job fell squarely on Kenji.

"Big Brother, we've gotten close to the three suspicious people and are investigating them, ho!"

"We picked up some strange electromagnetic waves and detected an L-shaped metal device with our sensors, ho! There's a 90 percent chance they have radios and guns, ho!"

"Veltlion, three small unmanned crafts—what you'd call drones here on Earth—are stationed overhead. Based on their position and movement, we can assume they're backup for the guards on the ground."

Koutarou and the girls hadn't expected their plan to go off without a hitch, however. Emily typically had two men keeping an eye on her at all times. But since her guards would have to keep their distance today because of the race, they'd arranged for drones and brought a third man with them. Moreover, they were armed. There was also no guarantee that the drones were the extent of their surveillance net. Koutarou and the girls would have to be careful. Whether or not they could do this stealthily would determine the success of the operation.

"Kiriha-san, what do you think?"

"This is all within expectation. It shouldn't affect how we proceed."

"All right... You hear that, everyone? The plan's a go."

Koutarou relayed the news to the girls and signaled Kenji. Since he was with Emily, he wasn't wearing a communicator in order to avoid standing out.

"I sure hope Nii-san will be okay..."

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure they don’t touch Mackenzie.”

“Thank you, Kou-niisan.”

Seemingly knowing what Koutarou and Kotori were talking about, Kenji glanced over and gave them a quick nod before turning back to Emily.

Clubs were a big part of school life at Kisshouharukaze High School, making the interclub obstacle marathon every bit as big of a deal as the sports festival’s grand finale—the team relay. Everyone looked forward to it with anticipation, and that anticipation reached a fever pitch just as the race was about to start.

“Hahh... Here we go...”

In the midst of all the excitement, however, Yurika was feeling lower than ever. Today would mark the demise of her part-time job for good. The factory she worked for would inevitably be shut down, meaning she wouldn’t get paid for all the work she’d done... meaning she wouldn’t be able to buy all the Blu-rays and manga she’d been looking forward to. That alone was bad enough, but all of her coworkers would be out of a job too. It was misfortune after misfortune, and the weight of Yurika’s misery nearly crushed her as she crouched down on the ground to cry a little.

“Keep it together, Yurika! Save your tears for later!” Koutarou encouraged.

“B-But... everyone’s going to...”

“If we don’t save Emily-san and her family today, then there will be people all over the world who end up without jobs!”

The premature leak of Forthorthian technology would lead to an industrial collapse. Why use old technology when there was something newer and better? The manufacturing sector as Earth knew it would face bankruptcy, spelling rampant unemployment the world over.

“Hngh... Y-You’re right. I-I’ll do my best...”

Yurika wiped away her tears and forced herself to stand up. She was, after all, a magical girl of love and courage. That gave her the strength she needed to steady her legs and steel herself. There would be time to cry later. For now, it

was her job to run damage control and keep an already bad situation from getting worse.

“Yurika...”

Koutarou had something he was planning on saying if Yurika didn't stand up. He was sure she'd need a little more motivation to get on her feet.

I guess Yurika's growing in her own way. She really is doing her best...

But to his surprise, it seemed that wasn't necessary. So he kept it to himself and instead said something he hadn't planned for at all.

“Don't eat too much curry at the speed eating obstacle. I know Landlord-san's curry is the best, but you need to be able to keep running afterward.”

“Don't worry. Shizuka-san said she'd make me as much as I wanted after the mission is over.”

“I take it back. That side of you hasn't changed in the least...”

“Huh? What was that?”

“It's nothing. Let's go. The race is just about to start.”

“Okay.”

Yurika rubbed her eyes one more time, and when she lowered her hands, she now looked like a magical girl ready to face the trials to come. Koutarou glanced at her from the side and wished that she could always look like that, but then he thought better of it and smiled wryly. Not long after, the starting pistol signaled the beginning of the marathon.

Koutarou and the girls chose starting positions in a circle around Emily in order to ensure maximum safety at the chaotic start of the race. Since everyone took off running at the same time, things would never be more hectic than they were right out of the gate. But with their strategic positioning, at least one of them should end up somewhere near Emily and Kenji.

“Emily-san is ten meters out in front of me! Follow after her with my marker!”

As luck would have it, Shizuka ended up being the closest. She'd broken out

ahead of the pack at the very start of the race and then fallen behind in the ensuing chaos. Koutarou was only twenty meters or so behind Shizuka, but he couldn't see her through the crowd. All he had to go off of was a holographic map displaying markers for Shizuka, Kenji, and Emily's positions.

"S-Satomi-san, p-please wait!"

While Koutarou was keeping a good pace, Yurika was already struggling. She wasn't fit, either mentally or physically, to keep up with all the chaos. And upon realizing the sorry state she was in, Koutarou decided to do something bold.

"Come on, Yurika!"

"Satomi-san? Wha— Kyaaah!"

He grabbed Yurika by the arm, pulling her closer before picking her up like a princess. As far as he was concerned, this would be far faster and safer than letting Yurika run around on her own amidst all the confusion. He would literally carry her through the race, at least until they got out of the clustered chaos at the start.



“You can be really pushy at times, Satomi-san...”

“Just for today!”

“But didn’t you do this with Sakuraba-senpai two years ago too?”

When Yurika mentioned it, Koutarou recalled something similar had indeed happened once upon a time. Running the marathon with Harumi as a first-year, he’d scooped her up for an early start too.

“Sakuraba-senpai is special!”

“Why not just say I’m special too?!”

“It’s not like you have an excuse!”

In Harumi’s case, her weak constitution and frailty put her at a serious disadvantage at the chaotic start of the marathon. Koutarou had carried her through it because he wanted to give her a fighting chance at finishing the race.

“Still... Has it really been two years since then?” he asked.

“It makes this feel kind of nostalgic.”

“Yeah. Back then, we were all just fighting...”

Koutarou could hardly believe how things had changed. So much had happened since that spring two years ago that it felt like it had been five or more.

Back then, I was doing everything I could to drive them out...

That might have been the most unbelievable part. In the past, he was desperate to get rid of the warmth he was now carrying in his arms. And it wasn’t just Yurika, either. He’d tried pushing away all of the girls that were now supporting him, blind to the fact that his destiny lay with them. Thinking about it that way now, he couldn’t help tightening his grip on Yurika a little.

“Why is bad stuff always happening to me?” Yurika whined.

“In that regard, nothing’s changed at all,” Koutarou quipped.

“Please don’t say that... I’d almost forgotten.”

“My bad. Actually, I admit that I was just thinking about how you’ve

changed.”

“How so?”

“You’ve gotten a little, um... well...”

“Don’t hesitate there! If you’re going to praise me, then say it loud and proud!”

“Fine. You’ve gotten a little heavier.”

“Wah! You shouldn’t say *that* at all!”

Luckily for Koutarou, Yurika had no idea what he was really thinking. It helped put him at ease, but it was far too early to get complacent. They still had a job to do, so Koutarou rallied a little more strength in his legs and pressed boldly onward.

The first obstacle was at the 500 meter mark in the children’s playground. Since it was so close, there were large groups of runners flooding in. But the obstacle here was the traditional grade school-level math quiz, which helped thin the crowd and stagger the runners. There were those that could solve all ten problems in a flash and those who’d spend ten or more minutes stuck on this first hurdle. It was here that Koutarou ran into Sanae.

“Heya, Sanae.”

“Huh, you’re already here? That was fast.”

Sanae looked up from her worksheet in surprise when she heard Koutarou’s voice. She’d thought he’d take longer to get to the first obstacle with Yurika in tow.

“We don’t have any time to mess around today, you know?”

“That’s true. We all have to do our best.”

Koutarou set Yurika down and took a seat next to Sanae. Yurika went and grabbed two worksheets, setting one down in front of Koutarou before taking a seat herself. There were desks scattered about the playground for the purpose of the marathon, most of which were already filled with other runners.

“What happened to Aika-san?” Koutarou asked.

“She left together with Shizuka. I’m no match for Maki when it comes to math,” replied Sanae.

“I bet.”

Koutarou and the girls had had a hand in planning the obstacle marathon, and Sanae and Yurika had insisted on getting the answers to this first obstacle ahead of time. It was, after all, an emergency. But nevertheless, their request was denied for several reasons. The first was that Koutarou and Maki, who were strict about following the rules, disapproved. Theia and Kiriha did as well, but for strategic reasons. They thought it would look unnatural if the same group of people stayed around Emily throughout the entire race. Moreover, Harumi and Ruth were against it simply because it would be unfair to the other participants. As such, they insisted Sanae and Yurika solve the math problems just like everyone else... meaning they’d inevitably be stuck at the first obstacle for a while. Fortunately, however, Shizuka, Maki and even Ruth were already out ahead. There wouldn’t be any problems if Koutarou and the other girls trailed along afterward.

“Let’s do our best on the next obstacles to make up for this.”

“Heck yeah! Let’s show them what we’re made of!”

Koutarou and Sanae were confident in their fitness, so they knew they’d be able to get ahead later on the obstacles that involved physical challenges. They wouldn’t be able to go all out because of the mission at hand, but they couldn’t help wanting to do well. They both, after all, loved a good race.

“I don’t have any confidence...”

Meanwhile, Yurika was taking the low road. She felt like keeping up was the best she could do. In fact, if she could just stay out of everyone’s way, that would be victory enough for her.

“All right! I’m done!”

Sanae had reached the first obstacle ahead of Koutarou and Yurika, and she was better at simple math than both of them. By the time Yurika reached the second problem on the worksheet, Sanae was already finished with all ten on

hers.

“That was fast, Sanae.”

“I *was* done with half of them by the time you guys got here. So I’m going on ahead. See you later!”

With that, Sanae gave an energetic wave and got the referee to check her answers before departing the first obstacle.

“We’ll be right behind you!”

“Good luck, Sanae-chan!”

Koutarou and Yurika shouted after her, waving as she ran off.

She still loves games and contests as much as ever...

Watching her go, Koutarou couldn’t help thinking back two years. Sanae was pretty snappy when he first met her, but she’d always relished having a little competitive fun with the most innocent, childish smile on her face.

“Satomi-san, we have to solve our problems too.”

“Yeah, let’s do our best.”

Returning to his senses, Koutarou went back to working on his quiz alongside Yurika. Unlike two years ago, she wasn’t struggling as much with the problems and managed to finish just about the same time Koutarou did.

Koutarou caught up with Theia at the third obstacle. Two years ago, it had been a dexterous challenge of carrying a ping pong ball with a spoon, but this year it was speed eating curry. Changing things up like this was part of what made the obstacle marathon so much fun.

“Hey, Theia.”

“Koutarou? Wasn’t Yurika with you?”

“She got stuck at the second obstacle.”

“Ah, grabbing a ping pong ball with chopsticks? That took me some time myself.”

“Yeah. She’s way better with a spoon.”

Koutarou had managed to catch up with Theia because of the time she’d lost at the second obstacle, and now the third as well.

“I gotta ask, Theia. Why are you eating so delicately now?”

“I have to keep up appearances.”

“It wasn’t all that long ago you didn’t have any trouble gorging yourself in front of a crowd...”

“Back then I was just a foreign transfer student, and now I’m a Forthorthian envoy. It’s not at all the same.”

Theia was taking her time on the third obstacle because she knew people were watching her. While it hadn’t officially been made public yet, rumors were already circulating around school that she was someone important based on her history at the school and the way people talked about her now. And because of that, Theia couldn’t risk doing anything to ruin her image. Just eating curry sloppily could reflect poorly on Forthorthe.

“Then you’re no better off than you were two years ago. Granted, your reason is different now.”

Two years ago, Theia had also struggled at the speed eating challenge. She’d wasted an inordinate amount of time tearing off tiny pieces of bread and eating them in a most ladylike fashion. But now she was acting out of national pride rather than personal pride. She too had changed over time and gradually come to reveal a bit more of her true self.

“You’re the only one who ever needs to know the real me.”

Nevertheless, Theia was still stymied here at the third obstacle because she had her image to worry about. But she wasn’t discouraged. She knew that she could always be herself in room 106. So she ate away as daintily as she had as a first-year, but she didn’t look anywhere near as unhappy as she had back then.

“If you’d been able to say that two years ago, you would’ve won by a landslide...”

Koutarou felt if he’d met Theia as she was now two years ago, he would’ve

become her vassal after hearing her story. She'd grown into a splendid leader and had that effect on people. She made them want to follow her.

"But of course. I've become an excellent princess."

Theia boasted proudly as though it were undeniable fact and flashed the same radiant, confident smile she had two years ago. The only difference was that, this time, it had real meaning behind it. Knowing that, Koutarou couldn't help smiling back at her.

"Yeah, I know."

"But to tell you the truth... I'm glad you met me when I was such a fool."

"Why's that?"

"Because I don't regret anything about the past two years I've spent with you."



With those words, Theia's smile changed. It was a subtle change that only those who knew her well would notice, but it was so glaring to Koutarou that he had to look away.

"H-Hurry up and eat already... We don't have any time to waste."

"Says the boy who started the conversation. How self-serving..."

Koutarou was only trying to cover up his embarrassment, but Theia heeded his words and promptly got back to eating. She was only taking petite bites, but she radiated a special energy that drew attention from everyone around her. Koutarou had a vague understanding of what that was, but pretended not to notice.

Koutarou caught up to Kiriha at the fifth obstacle. As a natural genius, there was only one task that her mind couldn't make simple work of... and that was dumb labor. In terms of brute strength, Kiriha's wits didn't do her any favors.

"So that's why you're stuck here, huh?"

"For two and a half more minutes."

The fifth obstacle was to move four barrels of varying weights from one bench to another. Kiriha had managed to move the three lightest ones, but gave up upon trying to lift the fourth barrel. The penalty for being unable to complete the challenge was a two and a half minute layover for each unmoved barrel, and Kiriha was still waiting out her term.

But she was lucky. There were plenty of female participants who'd gotten stuck on the third or even second barrels, meaning they had two and three times as long to wait. The only girls in the race who'd been able to move all four were those who trained regularly, like Shizuka with her martial arts.

"So even the amazing Kiriha-san is just a normal girl when it comes down to physical strength..."

"I pride myself on being quite feminine, you know."

Kiriha gave Koutarou a dirty look after what he said. That was rare coming from her, and it gave Koutarou quite a shock to see it.

"...I know that. You're always taking care of me."

Kiriha was practically in charge of Koutarou's lifestyle. She and Ruth were always cooking for him, and she even stepped in to help out with the laundry and other cleaning when he fell behind on it. It made him feel guilty, but it was just a testament to how wonderful and thoughtful Kiriha was. He didn't mean to belittle that, and couldn't help the self-conscious smile that crossed his lips.

"Goodness, Satomi-kun, don't say such shameless things in broad daylight! At least save it for when it's just the two of us!"

Kiriha blushed and whipped around, bashfully trying to hide herself away from him. It was a completely non sequitur reaction to their conversation, but she wanted the people around them to think they'd been talking about something different. And it worked.

"H-Hey, Kiriha-san! Why are you blurting out something like that all of a sudden?!"

Koutarou felt the eyes of almost everyone around fall on him. Most were just curious onlookers, but he felt plenty of hostility mixed in with the bunch. Thanks to the psychic powers he'd gotten from Sanae, he could tell that some of his male classmates were ready to kill him.

"If I had to say, it's because I just can't help wanting to tease my beloved a little," Kiriha whispered into Koutarou's ear, still blushing.

Her incredible acting had everyone around them going.

"Okay, okay, I get it! Please forgive me! You're the perfect girl, no matter how you look at it!"

"As long as you understand."

Koutarou was confident in his strength, so the fifth obstacle would've been a cakewalk if not for the serious blow Kiriha had dealt him.

"God, thinking back on it, you've had me wrapped around your little finger for two years now, Kiriha-san..."

Once he regained his cool and gave it some thought, Koutarou realized that he'd been dancing in Kiriha's palm since the day they met. Even when he wanted to complain, Kiriha always had a reason for acting the way she did. She

was practically untouchable. Koutarou could never really get angry at her. And that was part of the reason he felt for her the way he did.

“You’ve got it backwards, Satomi Koutarou.”

“Huh?”

“You’re the one that really had me going over something as illogical as a timeslip.”

“I do feel really guilty about that...”

“There’s no need to feel guilty. It was fate, after all.”

Kiriha smiled as though it were the most natural thing in the world. At first glance, her relationship with Koutarou didn’t seem to have changed at all over the past two years. That was because what *had* changed was deeper than that, far below the surface. They might still have the same banter they always did, but it had a completely different meaning now. It made the grinning Kiriha feel both nostalgic and refreshed.

“But in the end, I’m no match for you, Kiriha-san. I wasn’t when we first met, I definitely wasn’t when you were a kid, and I’m certainly not now.”

“Who knows what might happen if you used your real strength, hmm?”

If Koutarou got serious, he could easily force a weaker girl into submission. Not that Kiriha in particular would really resist him to begin with.

“If I did that, we wouldn’t even be here in the first place.”

That wasn’t what Koutarou wanted. Using force would only tear apart the bonds they’d worked so hard to build up. Even his relationship with Theia—which appeared to be based on them fighting—was really only about them goofing around together.

“I know. That’s why I love you.”

“And that side of you is the most unfair of all, Kiriha-san...”

“Of course. It’s the one thing I refuse to yield on.”

To that, Koutarou had no response. When Kiriha played that card, there was only one way he *could* respond... and those three little words were the hardest

thing in the world for a teenage boy to say.

According to the mission plan, Koutarou and the girls would bow out of the race and begin the rescue operation at the fifth obstacle. It was the perfect location. Emily would end up being delayed for the same reason Kiriha and many of the other girls were, making it look quite natural when they all managed to group up there. It put them into position to kick things off just as soon as they departed. So for Koutarou and the girls, this was where the real race started.

“I’m sorry to ruin your first obstacle marathon like this, Aika-san.”

Koutarou apologized to Maki when she arrived. She’d so been looking forward to the race, but was being forced to drop out just halfway through it.

“Don’t worry. I get to enjoy every day with you, Satomi-kun. Complaining about something so trivial would be silly.”

Maki shook her head with a smile. It was indeed a shame to miss out on the race, but Maki would never put her own desires before someone else’s happiness. Maki had only recently come to know warmth in a frigid world, and in that sense, she too was now a magical girl of love and courage.

“You’re such a good girl, Aika-san.”

“I’m not... It’ll take a lot more than this to make up for my evil ways.”

“Well, you can start by helping me out with sulky Princess Clariosa over there.”

Unlike reserved Maki, Clan quite openly wore her heart on her sleeve. It was plain as day she was unhappy.

“I-It’s not like I have any complaints about the plan!”

“Then why are you so upset?”

“That’s... because these villains have terrible timing!”

Clan forced out that answer in desperation, but she wasn’t at all wrong. Koutarou had had exactly the same thought.

“Sounds like you were looking forward to the obstacle marathon after all, huh?”

“I w-was not! What a baseless assumption!”

“Is it, though? I don’t think you’d be so angry if you hadn’t been looking forward to it.”

“Ugh...”

“But still... you’re right about bad timing. I’m pretty irritated myself.”

Koutarou and the girls were the ones who’d decided to put their plan into action today, but they hadn’t had much of a choice. The obstacle marathon was the safest and surest way to rescue Emily. If there had been another option, they gladly would’ve chosen it. That just simply wasn’t the case. So Koutarou thought Clan was absolutely justified; these bad guys had terrible timing.

“I’ll think of something to make it up to you later, Clan. But for now, cheer up. You’ll make us all sad looking like that.”

When those words left Koutarou’s mouth, Clan’s expression relaxed a little.

“You’re right... Nothing good will come from sulking like a child in a situation like this.”

Koutarou had assumed Clan would put up more of a selfish fight than that, so he was actually a little disappointed she’d come around so quickly.

Man, that was easier than I thought it’d be... Er, but now’s not the time for that!

Clan, just like Maki, craved kind words. She needed to be told she was needed. And the only reason she relented so easily this time was because Koutarou had already given her what she needed, said what she wanted to hear. Koutarou didn’t realize that, of course. But seeing the fond way Ruth was smiling at him told him he’d done the right thing somehow, so he decided not to dwell on it. It wasn’t like he had the time for that anyway.

“Ruth-san, what’s everyone’s current position?”

“Harumi-sama and Sanae-sama will reach their destination in the next ten seconds. After that, everyone will be in position.”

“All right. Let’s do this!”

Confirming that all the pieces were in place, Koutarou waved his hand and gave the signal. Seeing it, Kenji—who was holding up Emily by pretending to tie his shoelaces—stood up. The two of them then took off, departing the fifth obstacle. And so plan “rescue the Brown family and secure the navigation device” was set in motion.

Professor Brown had made but one request, and that was for Koutarou and company to prioritize rescuing his family. His insistence made it clear that he didn’t care what happened to him so long as his wife and daughter were safe. Koutarou respected that and made sure the first stage of the operation would be extracting Claire and Emily.

It would have been ideal to grab them at the same time, but the difference in their situations meant they had to focus on Emily first. She could move around freely, making her the harder target to nab.

“Master, Yurika-sama will begin her incantation in fifteen seconds!”

As the mission’s operator, commander, and tech wizard, Ruth, Kiriha, and Clan respectively were now holed up in a van not far from the fifth obstacle. They’d be providing backup to the others via wireless communications.

“Got it! Clan, where are the drones and the guards?”

Koutarou and Maki were presently about twenty meters behind Emily and Kenji. The distance had been closer to a hundred meters when they first left the fifth obstacle, but they’d diligently caught up to them since.

“The three drones are all on standby in the air. It looks like they’re just here to get an overhead view of things. Currently, the guards are moving down the embankment. One is just ahead of point B, and the other two are behind him.”

“They’re moving as anticipated. The rest is up to you. Good luck, Satomi Koutarou!”

Emily’s detail for the day consisted of three armed guards and three drones—a notable increase from usual. They were keeping a strict watch over the event. The drones had assumed a delta formation overhead, securing a wide field of

view. The three guards on foot then went to check out any blind spots. It was a rather efficient method of surveillance. These guards were no amateurs, and it made Kiriha a little nervous. You could hear it in her voice.

I hope I'm just overthinking it... but no good will come of making anyone fret now...

Kiriha stifled her worries and connected with Yurika, who was waiting on the line on standby. She knew this wasn't the time to hesitate.

"Yurika, you can start now!"

"Okay! Perfect Illusion! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!"

Yurika was ahead of Koutarou and the others, hiding under a bridge at point B. The race course followed the river, meaning the runners would all eventually pass under said bridge. The plan was for Yurika to create an illusion as they did. She would project an image of Koutarou and Maki colliding with each other and tumbling to the ground as Kenji and Emily stopped to try to help them up.

"Mackenzie-sama and Master are approaching point B!"

Yurika completed casting her spell just as they hit the bridge. They'd practiced it several times together and hit the timing spot on. Yurika also cast her spell on a wide area around the bridge to make sure the guards saw the illusion and nothing more while the plan took place.

"Okay, Emily-chan, I know this is sudden, but I need you to listen to me!"

"Wh-What is it, Kenji?"

"We're taking you to Professor Brown!"

Kenji called out to Emily in English because he wanted to make sure she understood every word of what he was saying. He'd even planned out a script ahead of time to make sure everything was perfect—exactly the kind of preparedness one might expect from a drama club member. And as such, Koutarou and Maki left the talking to him.

"You mean my dad?!"

"You know something's been up with him lately, right? It's because someone's threatening him! They're using you and your mom like hostages!"

“M-Mom too?! Oh my god...”

What Kenji was saying was terrible, but Emily had a hunch he was telling the truth. Her father had suddenly decided they were all moving to Japan, and then he'd practically disappeared off the face of the earth... Something definitely wasn't right. And that was completely independent of the fact that she thought it was strange her mother never left the hotel. Putting everything together, it all made sense.

“But even if what you're saying is true, how do I know I can trust you?!”

That was the fundamental problem. Emily didn't really know if Kenji and his friends were on her side. Even if he was telling the truth about her father, if Kenji was in on it too somehow... she could end up in an even worse situation.

“You don't have to listen to me! Just listen to him!”

There, Kenji signaled Koutarou. When he did, Koutarou tapped on his bracelet and summoned a hologram in the air.

“Emily, Claire? Are you listening?”

“Dad?!”

The hologram was of Professor Brown. And upon seeing her father for the first time in ages, Emily was at a loss for words.

“You might not understand what's going on at present, but I need you to do as these people say. We're in a lot of trouble right now. Trusting them is a gamble, but it's the best gamble we have. I know it may be hard, but please believe me. Emily, Claire... I love you.”

In order to actually rescue the Browns, Koutarou and the others would need Claire and Emily to trust them. They'd prepared this footage of Professor Brown ahead of time for exactly that reason, and it seemed to be having the intended effect on Emily.

“Dad...”

“I know it's a lot to take in all at once, but just think about it! Your father trusted us enough to give us that footage! So please do the same, Emily-chan! Please trust us!”

“Kenji...”

Emily hesitated. Everything Kenji and her father had said made sense, but something deep in her gut stopped her in her tracks. The dire nature of the situation was clear, however. She knew there wasn't time to waste, and so Emily bravely ventured to put her doubts to bed.

“Is this the only reason you became friends with me, Kenji?”

If she took his words at face value now, then their friendship up until this point had been fake. Kenji's smiles, his jokes, his kind words... They were all an act. In and of itself, that would undercut any trust Emily might have in him. She was at odds. There were two Kenjis standing before her, and she didn't know which one was real.

“Emily-chan...”

Emily's question and the uneasy look on her face made Kenji fumble for words. This wasn't in the script, so he had to come up with an answer of his own.

“At first... I heard that a cute transfer student had enrolled at our school, so yeah, I came to meet you out of curiosity. I'm a sucker, after all... But I was interested in you from the start. It was only after hearing about your situation from a friend that I decided to cooperate with all this. I just wanted to help you, Emily-chan.”

Kenji decided to be honest with Emily. He could feel her trust in him crumbling, and he knew that piling on more lies would completely destroy it.

“I have to say it was all for this or else my little sister will get pissed at me, but the truth is...”

“Kenji...”

“If you wanna know how I really feel, why don't you skip this stupid marathon and go on a date with me?”



That was the best Kenji could muster. In the heat of the moment, he didn't feel like an A-list actor in a romance movie... He felt pathetic and couldn't help smiling bitterly at himself.

"I'm not like my dad, you know... I don't gamble on people so easily."

Hearing Kenji's words, Emily made up her mind. She really couldn't just blindly believe in Koutarou and the others...

"Emily-chan, we're—"

"But I will take a gamble on you, Kenji. So... where shall we go for this date?"

However, she did believe in Kenji. The face he made when he mentioned his sister was a sweet, affectionate look she'd seen him make before. And seeing it now helped her connect the two Kenjis that seemed so wildly different in her mind. If he'd stuck to his act, he would've lost her for good here.

After Emily made her decision, things proceeded quickly. First, Maki disguised herself as Emily and Koutarou as Kenji. Yurika then used her magic to hide the real Emily and Kenji so they could get away from the race. Yurika then created illusions of Koutarou and Maki to run alongside the real deal, making it look like everyone was still in the race. That would hopefully buy them enough time to save Claire as well before anyone realized anything was amiss.

"Satomi-kun, do you think it worked out well?"

Maki worriedly turned to Koutarou who was running next to her. Her face—appearing as Emily's—had a tired but somehow invigorated smile on it.

"I sure hope so. The outcome of this will change a lot," Koutarou said with a nod of Kenji's jovial countenance.

They'd decided to enact their plan under the bridge because it was a blind spot for the drones overhead. Even the most accurate illusions were still obvious when they were first cast. If one of the drones managed to catch it on camera, it would be easy enough to slow down or enhance the footage and see what had really happened. That's why Yurika needed cover to cast her spells. There was still a chance someone might see through them, however. Human

senses sometimes surpassed machine specs, after all. So it was all they could do now to trust in Yurika's magical skills.

"There's no need to worry. The three guards are moving farther down the embankment now."

"The drones haven't changed position, either. They're maintaining a triangular formation above you, Master."

"Welp, that's the first hurdle over and done with..."

Koutarou let out a long sigh, but it was one of relief. He now wore an expression every bit as bright as Kenji's.

"Yurika-san will have to stick around and see things through, though."

Maki tossed a glance behind her at the illusions of herself and Koutarou running. Yurika was controlling the illusory Maki and Koutarou herself, which was no small amount of work. Running while simultaneously maintaining two accurate, moving illusions was tough going. The illusions could be made independent if given simple commands, but that wouldn't help here. It would seem strange if they didn't wave back to their classmates cheering for them, for example. Yurika would have to control all of that manually. In that sense, Maki had it much easier just maintaining a disguise for herself and Koutarou. The most she had to control was their expressions.

"You can do it, Yurika!"

"I'll do my best..."

Yurika's reply lacked her usual energy, but Koutarou wasn't too worried. Yurika had never failed him at a time like this.

The others should be making their move right about now too, but Kiriha-san sounded nervous earlier... I hope everything's okay.

Rather than Yurika, Koutarou was concerned about Kiriha, the other girls, and Claire. But Emily's rescue and the race at hand demanded his attention, so all he could do was pray for them.

The Rescue Mission

Sunday, May 15th

Professor Brown's wife, Claire, was confined to her hotel room—the penthouse suite on the fourteenth floor of the Traditional Kisshou. And conveniently, the interclub obstacle marathon would pass right by that exact hotel. It hadn't been that way last year, of course, but Koutarou and the others had had a hand in planning the course for the marathon this year.

“Kyah!”

Just before the marathon reached the Traditional Kisshou, however, a high-pitched scream rang out. One of the female runners had caught her foot on the sidewalk and taken a rather nasty tumble. She rolled along the ground, coming to a stop right at the entrance to the hotel. She was wearing a flashy pink outfit decorated with all kinds of frills and ribbons, so it came as no surprise to anyone that her bib identified her as a member of the cosplay society. Indeed, it was none other than the cosclub's rising star, Higashihongan Sanae.

“Are you okay?!”

Before anyone else could react, a woman in a suit came running up to her. She was so elegant and composed that she looked like an executive secretary for an elite corporation, but that wasn't actually the case. It was the burgeoning university student Sakuraba Harumi.

“Owie, owie, owie! My legs! Ow!”

“Oh no, you're bleeding!”

Both of Sanae's shins and knees were red. At first glance she appeared to be bleeding quite seriously, but it wasn't actually her blood. Harumi had smeared it on her when she came over to help, which was why she'd made sure to be the first to respond.

“Oh no! That girl fell over and she looks hurt!”

“Should we call an ambulance?”

“Of course we should!”

After a moment, people started to gather around. The first three were Kenichi, Hayato, and Megumi of the Sun Rangers who were all dressed to the nines.

“What should we do while we wait for it to get here? I know! You over there! Does this hotel have an infirmary of some kind?”

It was Daisaku in his expensive suit, wig, and false beard that called out to the hotel porter. He looked and sounded like he was the president of some important company.

“It does, sir.”

“Well? What do you say? I know this poor girl isn’t a guest of yours, but just look at her. Could we at least give her first aid inside?”

“Certainly. Please follow me right this way.”

Seemingly persuaded by Daisaku’s calm demeanor, the porter didn’t hesitate to throw open the door for him. Kenichi and Megumi helped Daisaku and Hayato carry Sanae inside, and the porter and the worried Harumi followed them all in before the door swung to. The porter, you see, was actually Kotaro in disguise.

“What happened?” the hotel manager asked.

“This young girl was injured right outside,” Kotaro explained. “If I’d just left her there, it would’ve looked...”

“Not another word. You made the right choice. Take her to the infirmary at once.”

“Yes, sir!”

Kotaro did a masterful job of playing his role as porter, easily slipping himself and the others into the hotel and past the manager. It was thanks to him that Harumi, Sanae, and the Sun Rangers were able to reach the infirmary without issue. The infirmary, however, wasn’t their destination. Once they reached it, they proceeded right past it and headed for the metallic door beyond that

opened up into an emergency stairwell.

“Phew... Things worked out just fine.”

Once she was sure there was no one else around, Harumi took a deep breath and let out a sigh. Honestly, this simple level of acting was nothing to her. But knowing someone’s life was on the line made even simple acting nerve-racking.

“Heehee. You all did great.”

Sanae practically hopped out of the Sun Rangers’ arms and made a ten-point landing on the floor. Since she hadn’t really been hurt in the first place, she was as energetic as ever.

“Kotaro, we’ll be walking up to the fourteenth floor from here. How often do these stairs get used?” Kenichi asked as he took off his suit jacket. From here on, it would only get in the way.

“The guests use the elevators and the employees have their own set of stairs, so these don’t see much use at all.”

“So we can rely on our specialty then,” Hayato said as he removed his signature shades. The emergency stairwell was only dimly lit, making it a bit hard to see with them on.

“Daisaku-kun, what’s our specialty again?”

“It’s that thing you’re not so good at, Megu-chan. In other words, brute strength.”

“Aww, I should have worn my combat suit...”

Today, the Sun Rangers were in business suits rather than their combat suits. Their combat suits were designed to keep them safe in battle, but they had more than just defensive power. They also made the Sun Rangers faster and stronger. Running up fourteen flights of stairs without them would indeed be a bit of a chore.

“If you’d like, I could use magic to make things easier.”

“Instructor Sakuraba, please save your magic. We never know what might happen.”

Magic could do all kinds of things, but even it had limits. The Sun Rangers wanted to be prepared for anything and everything that might lay ahead. Harumi understood that quite well and nodded judiciously.

“That’s fine, but... could you perhaps reconsider the whole ‘Instructor Sakuraba’ thing?”

“Hahaha, but you *are* our instructor!”

Recently, Harumi had been something of an informant for the Sun Rangers, teaching them about magic and new fighting techniques. And ever since she’d started doing that, Kenichi had been referring to her as “Instructor Sakuraba.” That bothered her much more than being on reserve in case something went wrong.

“All right, everyone! Follow me!”

“Yeah!”

With energetic Sanae taking the lead, the seven of them took flight, ascending the hotel’s emergency stairs.

Because this was a serious operation with high stakes, Sanae unleashed her psychic power, wreathing her body in a bright light that significantly increased both her natural speed and strength. In a sense, she’d made her own angelic version of the Sun Rangers’ combat suits. And thanks to that, she wasn’t even out of breath when she reached the fourteenth floor.

“I won! I made it first!”

“Jeez, to think I’d lose to a girl... Phew...”

The Sun Rangers following close behind her kept in formation, with Kenichi, Hayato, Daisaku, Kotaro, and Megumi reaching the top of the stairs in that order. Thanks to their strict daily training and all of their field experience, they were only slightly winded. It didn’t take them long to catch their breath.

“Higashihongan-san is a very special girl,” said Harumi, the last to arrive.

She was using one of Clan’s inventions, the Power Assistance Field or PAF. It was a device that selectively and strategically used barriers to make everyday

physical tasks easier. It was enormously helpful for Harumi, but she relied on it less and less these days since recovering her health. She didn't hesitate to whip it out in an emergency like this, however, and thanks to the PAF, she wasn't even out of breath.

"Special?" Hayato asked curiously.

"I was watching her, Hayato-niichan," Kotaro replied. "Sometimes it looked like she took an extra step beyond the stairs, and sometimes it looked like she was just plain hovering above them."

"Seriously? That's ridiculous..."

The Sun Rangers readied their weapons and other gear with their usual light banter. Once everyone was ready, they approached the door at the top of the stairs that led to the penthouse, their backs against the adjacent wall. This was their usual method for storming in.

"Kotaro..."

"I know."

At Kenichi's signal, Kotaro pulled out a long, narrow cable from his backpack. He was going to use a special camera to get a look at things on the other side of the door.

"I'll take a look too!"

But before he could, Sanae beat him to the punch. She walked up to the door and an image of herself leaped out of her body, leaning forward and putting her head right through the door.

"Here goes!"

With her head on the other side, she began looking around.

"Whoa!"

Seeing a paranormal phenomenon before his very eyes, Kotaro jumped back in surprise. The other Sun Rangers didn't raise their voices, but they were equally surprised.

"Er, um, I'm sorry for surprising everyone... My other half is a bit reckless..."

The initial incident was shocking in and of itself, but even more shocking was that Sanae's now-supposedly-abandoned body was still moving around on its own. Moreover, there was a different look on her face and her mannerisms were different. She was more calm and gentle than usual. For the Sun Rangers who didn't know Sanae's story, the surprises just kept coming.

"Don't worry. I don't see anyone around— Hey, what are you doing?"

"Hurry up and come back, Sanae-chan. You startled everyone. You can't just jump out of your body in front of people who don't know you can astral project."

"What? Really? You Sun Rangers still have a long way to go if *this* startles you."

Sanae was sure she'd demonstrated her psychic powers in front of the Sun Rangers before, so she was disappointed they were acting so surprised to see them now. But the truth was that Sanae's powers had evolved considerably since then; it was quite natural for them to be surprised. Not that Sanae was aware.

"Don't say that, Sanae-chan! That's rude!"

The biggest surprise of all, however, came when Sanae-chan and Sanae-san began bickering. As they shared the same soul, their quarrel was essentially Sanae's inner monologue shared aloud... But it was indeed quite a show for anyone who didn't know her.

"This is ridiculous, Kotaro..."

"Yeah, Hayato-niichan. I can feel a headache coming on."

Higashihongan Sanae, ignoring all laws of physics and common sense, was as energetic today as ever.

Compared to the emergency staircase, the fourteenth floor was brightly lit. That made exiting the stairwell risky—it would be the easiest time to spot the infiltrators coming out of the darkness. Because of that, the Sun Rangers were cautious about going in. Sanae, however, demonstrated no such regard. After merging back into one, she casually opened the door and stepped right

through.

“See? There’s nobody here.”

The stairwell opened up into a far corner of the main hallway on the fourteenth floor—an out-of-the-way location that saw very little traffic. Continuing down the hallway led to the elevators, which would likely be the first they saw anyone. But presently, Harumi wasn’t worried about being seen by people.

“What about these surveillance cameras?”

The hotel had a respectable surveillance system, including cameras lining the hallway. There was even one pointed right at the emergency stairwell.

“Instructor, I’ve hacked into the system and set it to replace the live feed with footage from yesterday. We should have a solid twenty minutes.”

“My! You’re so multitalented, Kotaro-san.”

Harumi flashed a relieved smile. While she herself didn’t know much about technology, she’d witnessed Clan and Ruth do such remarkable things before. So hearing Kotaro had overwritten the cameras impressed her more than it surprised her.

“That’s my only good point.”

“You don’t have to be modest, Kotaro-kun. We’d be helpless when it comes to computers without you.”

“You’re the only one who would say that, Daisaku-niichan.”

Kotaro was small and didn’t make much of an impression, but he was the Sun Rangers’ go-to tech guy. He’d been assigned to the team for his skill with all kinds of technology and machinery. That was why he often stood beside Megumi, who actually had a medical license. Three combatants alongside a technician and a medic was the standard composition for a Sun Squad team.

“Twenty minutes means we don’t have much time. Let’s move,” Kenichi urged the stalled group.

Hayato had already gone ahead to check out the elevators. Two hallways connected in front of them, forming a T-shaped juncture. Their destination lay

at the end of the hall that branched off from the hallway they were currently in.

“...”

As the group approached, Hayato flashed a silent signal with his hand. When he did, the Sun Rangers slowed down and crept closer cautiously. Following their lead, Sanae and Harumi did the same.

“How does it look, Hayato?”

“As expected, it’s well guarded. There’s a goon on patrol right outside the door.”

From the elevators, Hayato had peered around the corner and spotted a man in a suit. He wasn’t doing anything in particular—merely pacing back and forth in the hallway. But just from the glimpse he’d gotten of the man, Hayato could tell he was a professional.

“That’s not good. It doesn’t look like we can knock him out in a single blow,” Kenichi said with a bitter expression as he took a peek for himself.

The ideal scenario would’ve been incapacitating the guard as quickly and quietly as possible, but the hallway leading up to the penthouse was appropriately long and grand. There was almost no chance of sneaking up on him.

“That means this is Harumi’s chance to shine!”

“You’re right! We’re counting on you, Instructor Sakuraba!”

“O-Okay... Understood.”

Harumi still felt some resistance responding to “Instructor Sakuraba,” but she had no qualms about lending the team her assistance.

“Arise from within, spirits of the mind. Guide my target and weave a cage of sleep!”

Harumi pressed her hands together and recited an incantation in Ancient Forthorthian. She kept her voice down so that the guard wouldn’t notice her, but everyone standing immediately around her could feel her power. With every word she spoke, indigo-colored mana came pouring from her, coalescing in her right hand as she raised it aloft.

“Entrap, Seal of Dreams!”

At the end of her incantation, Harumi swung her hand downward. The indigo light gathered within it formed a glowing orb that sailed towards the guard at the end of the hall. He’d just turned away to begin another lap of pacing, so he didn’t even see it coming.

“...”

The moment the indigo orb struck him, it spread out to cover his entire body before it appeared to sink in and vanish. His head suddenly fell forward and he stopped in his tracks.

“Phew... Looks like it worked.”

Harumi let out a sigh of relief as she gave Sanae and the Sun Rangers a smile. She had no desire to harm the guard, so she had instead locked him in a harmless, hallucinatory prison. She’d put him to sleep under the spell of a dream that was indistinguishable from reality. As far as he would know until he woke up, he was still diligently doing his job.

Daisaku carried the spellbound man over to the window, making it look as though he was enjoying the view. That way, nobody would think it was suspicious if they happened to pass by.

“All right. I think it’s time.”

At Kenichi’s signal, the Sun Rangers drew their weapons. Kenichi had a bladed weapon for close combat, Hayato had a large revolver for ranged combat, and Daisaku had special gloves for martial arts. Kotaro and Megumi carried grenades and a small pistol, respectively, for support. They would all be storming the penthouse together.

From here on out, they would be relying on force. Thanks to Sanae, they knew exactly where Claire and the three guards were inside. But that didn’t mean attacking through the wall would be easy. Yurika had managed to do it before, but that was only made possible by her target’s proximity to the wall. Pulling the same thing off in a spacious penthouse was no mean feat. If they used too wide of an attack, they would put Claire in danger. And if they used pinpoint

precision to take out the guards one at a time, they'd inevitably be noticed. They needed to split the difference with a fast, accurate attack.

"Please be careful, everyone."

"Go get 'em!"

Harumi and Sanae didn't have much experience with this kind of technical operation, so in order not to get in the way, they stood back and let the Sun Rangers take the lead from here. They would use their magic and psychic powers respectively to offer support where they could.

"Let's do this!"

On cue, Megumi and Kotaro stepped forward. Kenichi then took a deep breath and began the countdown.

"Three, two—move!"

"Wait, what happened to 'one'?"

As Sanae quizzically cocked her head to the side, Daisaku swung his fist at the door. Using his size to his advantage, he put all of his weight into the punch. Although a limited-function version, the special gloves he was wearing worked like the Sun Rangers' combat suits. Between his own strength and their power, Daisaku's fist rivaled a pile driver capable of punching through bedrock.

Kabam!

The penthouse door didn't stand a chance. The lock was smashed in as the door burst open.

"Kotaro-kun!"

"On it!"

Now it was Megumi and Kotaro's turn. Megumi shot repeatedly into the room, sweeping from left to right. As she was using a spiritual energy weapon, however, it was practically silent. There were two guards sitting near the door. They initially jumped up from the sofa when the door was punched in, but as soon as Megumi opened fire, they dove for cover.

"Your setup wasn't bad. You're just up against the wrong guys."

It was there that one of Kotaro's grenades came rolling up to them.

"Whoa!"

"Crap!"

But instead of exploding in a fiery burst, it released a bright flash of light that completely robbed them of their vision. And that wouldn't be the only thing taken from them.

Bang, bang!

"Wh-What?!"

"Is there a sniper?!"

The pistols they were both holding suddenly went flying, but it happened too fast for someone to have run up on them after the grenade.

"So this is what those sunglasses were for..."

"I thought he was just trying to show off..."

"Sanae-chan! I told you to mind your manners!"

Hayato was the sniper who'd blown the guards' guns right out of their hands. His shades, as it turned out, were to protect him from the flashbang.

"Just who do you think I am...?"

"Let it go, Hayato! Another flawless job today!"

Kenichi was last up, and he charged into the room as soon as the flash died down. He assaulted the blinded, unarmed guards with his weapon. It had the appearance of a blade, but was meant to incapacitate its target with a high-voltage current. And it was thanks to that that both guards were now unconscious.

"They're so strong..."

Harumi was surprised by the Sun Rangers' performance. It had taken them less than ten seconds to subdue the guards. They were impressive, both individually and as a team.

"Way to go! The Sun Rangers are so cool!"

Harumi and Sanae had come to know the Sun Rangers as a hard-luck bunch of amateurs, however well-meaning they might be. Nothing seemed to be any different from the last time they'd worked together, so the girls certainly weren't expecting the glorious show the Sun Rangers put on for them today.

Bang, bang, bang!

"Whoa!"

Suddenly, three shots rang out. Kenichi immediately got low and looked around. The penthouse had multiple bedrooms, and there were now three bullet holes in the wall to one of them. Someone had fired through it.

"There's the other guard!"

"If it's just one guy, you can leave him to us! Come on, Harumi!"

Sanae recklessly ran towards the door to the bedroom. Several bullets came flying through it from the other side. They weren't aimed specifically at Sanae, but she was right in their trajectory.

"Answer my call and soar, spirits of wind! Whirl up a storm and sweep away this volley! Blow, Atmospheric Shield!"

Fortunately, the bullets were quickly deflected by Harumi's magic. Seeing her chance, Sanae leaped into the air and flew towards the door, one leg extended in front of her.

"Haaaaah!"

Whump!

In stark contrast to her powerful shout, Sanae's foot landed softly on the door in front of her. And despite it now being riddled with bullet holes, it didn't budge one inch.

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

The Sun Rangers had all been sure she was going to kick it right in, so they were rightfully stunned at this turn of events. However, Sanae's attack didn't end there.

"Sanae-chan, you need to stop doing things like this out of the blue..."

“Sanae-chan Craaaaash!”

“Eeek!”

Sanae-chan and the last remaining guard—a woman, apparently—could be heard shouting from the other side of the door. Sanae had projected through it when her foot came into contact with it, sending her astral self flying into the guard like a battering ram. Since she was basically just expelling spiritual energy without any fine control, its power and accuracy dropped off significantly the further away it got from her. But at close range, it was devastating.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing she’s done all day, Kotaro...”

“Does science mean nothing anymore?”

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry about Sanae-chan!”

“Didja see that? Justice always wins, so there!”

And like that, Sanae-chan dispatched the last guard in one hit, leaving Sanae-san to apologize for her actions.

For better or worse, Claire could tell that something serious was going on after witnessing Sanae’s otherworldly attack on the guard. Not knowing any better, however, she mistook it for Forthorthian technology. Unlike her daughter, she knew the situation Professor Brown was in. And that was a boon right now. After seeing the footage from her husband, Claire was perfectly willing to cooperate.

“What about Emily?! Is she all right?!”

“Please don’t worry. We rescued her before coming here.”

Like any mother, Claire was more concerned about her daughter than she was herself. And upon hearing the reassuring Harumi tell her that Emily was safe, relief washed over her.

“Oh, thank god... And what about Chris?”

She was a mother first, but Claire was also a devoted wife. Her next concern was her husband.

“Once we have you and Emily-san secured, we’ll move to rescue Professor Brown. So please come—”

“Let’s go right now. I’m already ready,” Claire said without hesitation, grabbing her purse from the master bedroom’s walk-in closet.

Inside of it was everything she’d need to make her escape. Before the Browns had come to Japan, her husband told her to be prepared for something like this.

“Please. Right this way, Claire-san. We’ll take the emergency stairs down to a vehicle we have waiting.”

Realizing everything was in place, Kenichi guided Claire towards the penthouse door. Harumi had put up a barrier before the Sun Rangers stormed the room in order to suppress any noise from the ensuing commotion. They couldn’t risk anyone making a complaint to the front desk. That danger had passed, but they wouldn’t have long before more BTE security came along now that they’d lost contact with the guards on site. Kenichi wanted to leave the hotel as quickly as possible.

“Coming!”

The Sun Rangers formed a circle around Claire with Kenichi at the lead. From here on, her safety was their top priority.

“All right! Sun Rangers, move out!”

With Claire in tow, the Sun Rangers, Harumi, and Sanae exited the penthouse. They made their way back to the emergency stairwell the same way they’d come. The plan was to have the “ambulance” someone called earlier pick them up to take the “injured marathon runner” to the “hospital.” Koutarou and the others, of course, would be waiting for them.

Now that Emily and Claire had been rescued, the operation swiftly moved into phase three: recovering Professor Brown and the navigation device. The device in question was scheduled to be used in an experiment today, meaning both it and the professor would be in the secret research facility underneath the factory where Yurika had been working. That gave Koutarou and company the perfect opportunity to grab them together in one fell swoop. That was

ultimately why they'd chosen today for the operation, and why they'd chosen to use the obstacle marathon as cover.

"We just got a message from Harumi-chan saying that they've rescued Claire-san from the hotel, ho!"

"So now that we have both her and Emily-chan, it's time to raid Yurika-chan's workplace, ho!"

"We'll nab both the device and the professor when they arrive, right?" asked Shizuka.

"Yes. I believe charging straight into Yurika's workplace and taking what we need is far better than coming up with some grand, elaborate plan," confirmed Theia.

"Um, can you please stop calling it my workplace?!" shouted Yurika over the comms, having heard their conversation.

Shizuka and Theia, alongside the two haniwas, were currently stationed outside the factory. With Emily and Claire's rescues a success, they were now waiting for a limo carrying the professor and a truck carrying the navigation device to arrive.

"Ruth, what's going on with Koutarou and the others?"

"They are en route towards Yurika's work— I mean you, Your Highness. They should be arriving in ten minutes."

"The professor and the device will get here first, ho!"

"It looks like we'll have to do this on our own, ho!"

With their respective missions complete, Koutarou's group and Harumi's group were currently on their way to rendezvous with Theia and Shizuka for the final leg of the mission, but they wouldn't make it to the factory before the professor did.

"So it'll be just us..." Shizuka sighed.

"Are you worried?" Theia asked.

"Well, a little. I'm still not really sure what it means to fight with all your

strength as a girl.”

“Well, in your case, it means your weight will increase.”

“Could you not bring that up, Theia-chan?! I *just* managed to stop thinking about it!”

Theia and Shizuka were stationed at the factory because their respective abilities were the most combat-forward. Rather than stealth or utility, they were put to best use laying out their enemies with firepower and brute force. And that kind of approach was only viable here in the third and final phase of the operation. That was why they’d strategically been positioned here with the haniwas to support them.

“It’s time for us to show our manly side, ho!”

“It’s finally our time to shine, ho!”

The haniwas were pumping themselves up to protect Theia and Shizuka. Seeing it, Shizuka couldn’t help thinking to herself...

I really hope so... Or maybe the professor could just get caught in traffic or something...

Shizuka was displeased Koutarou had stationed her here, knowing that it meant he saw her as someone who relied on brute force. And thinking about that, she despondently dusted off the apron she was wearing from preparing and serving food for the obstacle marathon earlier.

“Heh, good luck, haniwas. You’ll have a hard time outshining me.”

“We won’t lose, ho!”

“We’ll show you we’ve got guts, ho!”

“Splendid! That’s how true warriors should behave!”

In stark contrast to Shizuka, Theia was thrilled. She believed that this position was earned. It was something Koutarou had trusted her with, and that made it the most important position of all. And to meet his expectations, she would deliver a glorious, majestic display of force.

I need to achieve a complete and total victory that not even he would argue

with. No injuries, no collateral damage. Lethal weaponry should be limited to preventing the enemy's initial response. Shizuka's plenty strong, so this is my chance to show off my skill!

Theia's plan was to seize complete and utter victory, earning Koutarou's praise. If he praised her both physically and verbally, that would be even better. It would be the sweetest reward of all for a flawless mission. For as brave a warrior as Theia was, she was also a girl in love.

"Your Highness, please ready yourself. The limousine and truck are inbound. ETA is one minute."

"What about Koutarou and the others?"

"They're still coming, but they're a good ways out."

"So it really is just us... Oh well, all the better!"

"Crap, I was really hoping the professor would get stuck in traffic..."

Theia and Shizuka readied themselves for the professor's arrival. Since they were trying to be discreet, Shizuka was untransformed and Theia was carrying a noiseless laser rifle. The mission would begin as soon as the limo and the truck reached the factory grounds. The factory itself was surrounded by a high wall, so the fight should go unnoticed as long as it was short and sweet. Clan, however, suddenly came over the comms line with some unexpected news that might make things difficult.

"Theiamillis-san, both vehicles have turned around and are headed back!"

"What?!"

Clan had been observing things via an unmanned reconnaissance craft overhead. She'd been the one monitoring the limo and truck making their way towards the factory. They hadn't taken the most direct route, but everything was still within acceptable parameters. There were no signs they were onto anything strange. That's why Clan had overlooked the first odd turn they took. She had assumed they were just taking a cautious path to the factory. The second odd turn they took, however, was suspicious. They were now headed in the direction opposite the factory and picking up speed at an alarming rate, defying the posted speed limits. Once Clan realized what was happening, she

hurriedly reported the situation to Theia and Shizuka.

“We can’t just sit here! Let’s go after them!”

Theia was shocked, but she was quick to action and called for a small aircraft from the Hazy Moon. Blue Knight was still under repair outside of Earth’s orbit. When the aircraft arrived, she sent her new bicycle back to the Hazy Moon for safekeeping. She then cracked open the cockpit’s canopy and quickly jumped inside.

“Did they figure us out?!”

“We’re coming too, ho!”

“Don’t leave us behind, ho!”

Shizuka was panicking over what might have happened, but followed Theia into the cockpit of the small craft. The haniwas jumped in her lap right after. The aircraft was a two-seater about the size of a normal van and came equipped with optic camouflage. It was useful for hiding the craft while parked, but it didn’t do much to disguise engine noise. That’s why Theia only used it for emergencies—and this was definitely an emergency.

“Maybe! This mission was on a razor’s edge, after all!”

When humans were involved, there were always uncertainties at play. Man’s fickle nature made him difficult to pin down. Accidents happened, too. There had been no guarantee from the start that BTE wouldn’t find out about the rescue operation.

“Kiriha, we’re following those vehicles!”

“Call off your pursuit, Theia-dono. Please head over to the coordinates I’m about to give you instead.”

“Did you plan for this?”

“I took some precautionary measures. Like you said, this plan is riding on a razor’s edge.”

Kiriha wasn’t the type to overlook risks. At least, not without some kind of contingency. She was prepared for the possibility that BTE might discover them prematurely, but that in and of itself created a whole new gamut of risks. So as

prepared as she might be, it was far too early for them to let their guard down.

Before the operation began, Kiriha had taken the time to set up some contingencies. That included getting Clan to hack into the city's traffic signals and setting some conservative faction members up with construction signs and various equipment. The idea was that, by manipulating traffic lights and strategically setting up fake construction sites, Kiriha could guide the BTE convoy wherever she liked.

It was a clever strategy, but it had its risks. Since the diversions would be so public, they couldn't actually be set up ahead of time. Effectively, the plan was time sensitive. It would only take so long for the city to notice the traffic lights had been compromised and for the police to notice that unauthorized construction sites were cropping up and blocking traffic. Moreover, there was also the possibility that BTE might simply ignore traffic lights and construction signs, barreling right through them with no concern for safety. It could create a very dangerous situation, but Kiriha knew if she and the others missed their chance to secure the professor and the navigation system today, they would only end up caught deeper in BTE's web. If that happened, rescuing them would require an even riskier, more elaborate plan. That was why Kiriha wanted to get it over with today, despite the presented risks.

"Kiriha, we've arrived at the designated point. How are things going over there?" Theia asked over the comms line.

"We're managing to guide the convoy, though it's only so precise. Theia-dono, can you see the old buildings 400 meters to your north-northeast?"

Kiriha had sent Theia and Shizuka to what was essentially a relay point. Since she couldn't guide the BTE convoy with absolute precision, there was a certain margin of error in regards to where they would end up. Accordingly, Kiriha had sent Theia and Shizuka to the centerpoint of anticipated destinations. From there, they should be able to rush the convoy no matter where it ended up.

"I can see several shabby buildings, yes."

"I want you to move over there. It seems they're headed that way."

Shortly after Theia and Shizuka were in place, Kiriha realized exactly where

the BTE convoy was headed—an old, abandoned resort on the outskirts of Kisshouharukaze City. It was built back during the boom, but as economic growth slumped, so too had the resort’s business. By the time the Kisshou City and Harukaze City merger rolled around, the local resort was completely abandoned.

“What are they doing over there?” Theia pondered aloud.

She figured that if they were trying to make an escape, they’d be using a plane or boat. Since Japan was the only nation with diplomatic relations with Forthorthe—and therefore laws regarding the use of Forthorthian technology—it made perfect sense for BTE to try to leave the country with the contraband. But instead of abroad, the BTE convoy was currently headed up into the mountains. That puzzled Theia.

“Do they have some kind of secret base there?”

“I don’t know, but we should keep them from reaching their destination regardless.”

“You’re right about that! We’re en route to intercept now!”

Theia turned the joystick and swung her craft around to face the buildings Kiriha pointed out. The small craft only had a small engine, but it should still make it to the resort before the professor and the navigation device did. There was no telling what would happen to them once they reached a BTE facility, so the plan was to keep them from reaching it at all.

“Theia-chan, how are you going to attack?”

“I’ll start by bombarding the truck with laser shots.”

“Are you sure you should open with something so dangerous?”

“It’s not like it matters if the navigation device gets broken in the process.”

“Well, that’s true...”

Their goal wasn’t to recover the device so much as it was to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. Destroying it would be an easy way to accomplish that. Theia hadn’t dared to use a brazen assault like a bombardment thus far because of the risk of collateral damage. But now that the BTE convoy was

departing the populated urban area, that changed things. Theia could attack freely and accomplish their mission that way.

“As for the limousine carrying Professor Brown, could you take care of charging it, Shizuka?”

“What? You want me to just use brute force?”

“Honestly, I’d prefer you rescue the professor with some finesse.”

While Theia could attack the truck carrying the navigation device without worry, that wasn’t the case for the limousine. It was smaller than the truck, and more importantly, it had other passengers riding in it. Sending Shizuka to either stop or seize the car would be much safer.

“That’s fair. But make sure you back me up, Theia-chan.”

There, Shizuka took off her apron and safely stowed it away in the ship. She couldn’t stand the thought of dirtying it up in the coming fight. It was too important to her.

“I know, I know.”

Wshhh!

Theia cracked a smile as she cracked open the cockpit canopy. Air poured in at an astounding rate. Since the craft was traveling at several hundred kilometers per hour, the whipping wind outside was fierce. However, Shizuka hopped right out of the craft like it was nothing. The Fire Dragon Emperor could fly through even the void of space, so a little earthly breeze didn’t faze her.

“Sanae really seems superhuman at times, but so do you, Shizuka...”

Theia smiled dryly and closed the canopy since she only had her personal barrier to protect her from the wind. And once the canopy was closed again, she opened the comms line. Shizuka’s voice immediately came over it.

“Did you just say something, Theia-chan?”

What? Even if she didn’t hear exactly what I said, the fact that she could hear me at all over that wind... Just how keen are her ears?

Not wanting to upset Shizuka, Theia decided it would be best to tell a little

white lie.

“I said let’s begin our attack right away.”

“Got it! Then I’ll be off!” Shizuka said as casually as if she were going grocery shopping.

She then kicked off the topside of Theia’s aircraft, launching herself forward. She cut a beautiful arc in the air as she sailed towards the convoy with the Fire Dragon Emperor’s power of flight.

“All right. Time for me to get started too.”

Theia activated the craft’s firing control system, causing the two side-mounted laser cannons to whirr to life. The moment Shizuka reached the limo at the front of the convoy, Theia would begin her bombardment.

The firing control system Theia was using tracked her line of sight to aim for whatever she was looking at when she pulled the trigger. Since lasers moved at the speed of light, she didn’t need to give her target any lead like she would with, say, a modern machine gun.

“How about some of this?!”

Coordinating her attack with Shizuka’s, Theia squeezed the firing trigger. She sent two lasers flying into the truck right where she’d been aiming. One opened up a hole in the cargo area, and the other blew off one of the truck’s rear tires.

“A-Are we under attack?!”

“Now’s not the time for questions! If you don’t want to die, stop the truck and get out!”

The truck scraped against the guardrails as it came to a screeching halt, and two men jumped out of the front seat, one on either side. Just moments later, fire sprung up from the back of the truck. Theia’s attack had damaged the fuel tank.

“The truck’s stopped, Shizuka!”

“They’re shooting! It’s scary!”

By this time, a hail of bullets was raining down on Shizuka. The men in the limo had noticed her approaching and opened fire.

“Help me, Theia-chan!”

“Oh, come now! Something like this wouldn’t even scratch you.”

“I’m not a dragon, Uncle!”

As far as living creatures were concerned, Shizuka was in contention for the title of strongest in the entire universe. Alunaya was right—normal bullets would do nothing to her. Even armor-piercing rounds would only smart. It would take heavy artillery to do any real damage to her. But despite how tough her body was, Shizuka was still a normal teenage girl on the inside... And guns were scary.

“Hang in there! I’ll get them off your case!”

Theia gave the weapon selection panel on her dashboard a quick tap and pulled the trigger without bothering to take proper aim.

Pop!

The weapon she was using wouldn’t need it. It only needed to land in proximity to the target.

Flash!

“Okay, Shizuka! Do your thing!”

“I’m on it!”

Theia had fired a flashbang that landed behind Shizuka, exploding into a brilliant burst of light when it made impact. The three men leaning out the limo windows and firing at her were instantly blinded.

Theia had known from the get-go that she couldn’t fire at the limousine carrying Professor Brown. It was too dangerous. She needed to use something to support Shizuka without putting her in danger either, and a flashbang fit the bill perfectly. It was a masterful attack from a masterful fighter.

“You know, I haven’t gotten to use any karate lately...”

When Shizuka landed on the hood of the limousine, she leaned forward and

planted her hands on the roof.

“Wait, there’s a person on the car?!”

Rrip!

For Shizuka and her incredible strength, cars might as well have been made out of paper. She ripped the roof of the limo right off as the driver stared up at her in shock and awe.

That man in the back must be Professor Brown... He looks more haggard than in his photo, but considering what he’s been through, I guess that’s understandable.

Shizuka finally had a visual on the professor. He was sitting in the back of the limo with a guard on either side of him, carefully clutching a leather briefcase.

Screeeeech!

It was there that the driver, panicking over Shizuka, threw on the brakes. He barely knew what else to do and was simply acting on survival instinct, but his actions had a rather unexpected effect.

“Wha?!”

The limousine came to a screeching halt, but Shizuka didn’t. She continued speeding forward at the same velocity, which quickly put substantial distance between her and the stopped car. From Theia’s point of view, it almost looked like Shizuka had been thrown.

“Shizuka!”

“I’m fine! Don’t worry!”

Theia’s flustered voice came in over the comms line, but Shizuka was as calm as ever. Flapping the wings on her back to adjust her direction, she changed her course for a nearby tree and kicked off one of its thickest branches.

Crack!

“I’m going straight at it from here!”

“Shizuka?!”

Using the momentum from her kick, Shizuka flew right back at the limousine.

Unable to take the force of Shizuka launching herself off of it, the entire tree tipped over behind her.

“Hyaaaah!”

Fine-tuning the position of her wings as she sailed forward, Shizuka took a swinging chop with her hand at the hood of the limousine when she reached it.

Swish!

She put all of her weight and momentum into the blow, splitting the hood right in half. The limousine would never run again.

“Ooh, very impressive!”

“Yeah, I thought it was time for some karate.”

“You’re taking to draconic fighting quite well. That’s precisely how you attack from a flying charge.”

“Huh... I’ll make sure to remember that, Uncle!”

Shizuka dusted herself off as she stood up from the wreckage of the car. The driver watched her in horror, unable to move. He’d had a front-row seat for Shizuka’s incredible attack, the crack from which crept all the way up right next to him. The very scene struck fear into his heart that pinned him in place.

Just who the hell did we cross?!

The driver despaired, but he was actually rather lucky. Shizuka was just a normal high school girl at heart. She didn’t want to hurt anyone personally, and she belonged to a band of knights that upheld the virtues of peace and goodwill. As long as the driver didn’t try anything, he would live through this unharmed. Unfortunately for him, however, he didn’t know any of that right now.

The other guards in the limousine had been hanging out the windows to fire at Shizuka and were all subsequently blinded by Theia’s flashbang, leaving them completely unprepared to brace themselves for the driver slamming on the brakes. The sudden lurch had knocked two of them unconscious. The third guard had slammed his head against a window. He wasn’t critically injured, but

he was certainly no longer in fighting condition. Between them and the driver paralyzed with fear, there was no one left to oppose Shizuka as she took Professor Brown from the car.

“My apologies for the rough introduction, Professor Brown,” Theia said as she gracefully held the skirt of her dress.

She then greeted the professor with a Forthorthian-style curtsy, which had her hands in notably asymmetric placement. That was meant to make it easier to draw a weapon, which was something of a holdover from ancient times and spoke to Forthorthe’s long history as a nation of brave warriors.

“You’re Theiamillis-san of the delegation?! Then was that man from before also a Forthorthian?!”

Professor Brown knew Theia’s face—she was the mysterious girl rumored to be the real leader of Forthorthe’s diplomatic mission. The entourage that always accompanied her suggested she was someone very important indeed, which made sense to the professor. It would certainly explain a great deal of what had happened.

“He’s my first knight... Well, technically Ruth was the first, but he’s my knight nevertheless.”

“P-Please, Theiamillis-san! What of my wife and daughter?!”

But the professor had more than just Theia’s identity on his mind. He was desperate to know what had become of his family, and Theia answered him graciously.

“Don’t worry. My personal band of knights has rescued both of them. We’ll take you to them now.”

“I see... Phew... Thank god...”

Hearing the good news, the professor could feel his knees give out underneath him. He sat down on the spot and hung his head. Before this incident, Professor Brown had tried to live his life as a good man in accordance with his personal beliefs. BTE had twisted his arm and made him do things he never would have otherwise, all because they had his family held hostage. But now that was over and his family was safe. It was only natural that his legs

would buckle under the weight of such relief. Shizuka understood that perfectly.

“If you will, professor... We should get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Y-Yes, you’re quite right. My apologies.”

Shizuka reached her hand out to the professor and helped him up. She felt sorry for him and wanted to give him a moment of peace, but they weren’t safe here. Theia knew that as well and promptly got to work. She used her bracelet to transport the still-burning truck to the Hazy Moon. It would take too long to put the fire out and search for the navigation device, so Theia decided to send Clan the whole package. It would be immediately contained within a barrier on her ship to prevent damage from any explosions, which should also put out the fire. Nevertheless, Theia knew she would get an earful from Clan about this later as she watched the burning truck disappear into the black hole. But as it vanished, something else appeared—a red dot on the back of Theia’s head.

“Shizuka, this is bad!”

It was a sniper’s laser sight. Alunaya was the first to notice it, but quickly determined that it would be faster to say something to Shizuka than use magic to warn Theia directly himself.

“Theia-chan, get down!”

“What?”

Shnk!

But that moment’s delay would prove fatal. The moment Theia reacted to Shizuka’s voice, a searing beam of white light cut through the air... right at Theia’s head. Not even Shizuka and all her superhuman power would be able to stop it. It was a grim situation, and both she and Alunaya thought it was the end.

“Now’s our time to shine, ho!”

“We’ve got your number, ho!”

Fortunately, however, there were two more players on their team—Karama and Korama. Kiriha had sent them along with Theia and Shizuka, who were both

armed to the teeth in terms of offensive capability. That meant the haniwas were put to much better use protecting them rather than trying to help out with the assault. The most efficient way for them to do that was to conceal themselves until they were needed and keep a watchful eye on their surroundings. And that's exactly what they'd done. The instant they detected the beam charging, they'd moved into position to protect Theia.

"Synchronization mode activated, ho!"

"Spiritual energy field, ho! Focused deployment at full power, ho!"

However, the beam fired at Theia came from an anti-material rifle—the most powerful weapon available to infantry. It was essentially a handheld cannon that could shoot straight through a tank's barrier *and* its armor. The haniwas' barrier alone wouldn't be enough to stop it.

Bzzt!

The beam bored into the barrier before it collapsed completely. The flash of white light then sailed over the haniwas, still headed for its mark—Theia.

"We couldn't do it, ho!"

"Ho! We'll leave the rest to you, Big Brother!"

"Recall Precast Teleport!"

Pang!

However, just before the beam could strike Theia, a man in blue armor appeared out of nowhere and stepped in front of her to protect her. The beam connected with his armor, scorching its surface.



“Yeowch... Hey, isn’t this the same thing as that one time? That stupid big cannon you tried to kill me with, Clan?”

“That’s correct.”

“Koutarou, it’s you! Thank you!”

“You should be thanking Yurika and the haniwas. I couldn’t have saved you on my own.”

The haniwas were constantly relaying data to Clan and Ruth, and Yurika had used the information she’d gotten from them to teleport Koutarou’s group and Harumi’s group to Theia. The haniwas knew he was coming, and they’d planned their defensive maneuver accordingly. Koutarou’s armor was strengthened both by GoL and magic, and he himself had the additional protection of Signaltin and Saguratin. So the haniwas knew that as long as they could weaken the beam some, Koutarou should be able to block it. And, fortunately, things had worked out just as they’d calculated.

“Well done, you two. You really rose to the occasion,” pronounced Theia.

“You honor us with your praise, ho!”

“But we wouldn’t mind if you went the extra step and made us full-fledged knights too, ho!”

“Very well. As of today, you may fight as Princess Theiamillis’s proud knights!”

“All right, ho!”

“At your service, ho!”

The haniwas danced through the air, making their way towards the sniper. Yurika and Sanae were already en route, so they would handle the situation together.

“Sakuraba-senpai, I’ll leave the professor to you!” Koutarou said to the nearby Harumi as he activated the boosters on his armor and took off after the haniwas.

There was no way they could let their attacker go unchecked.

“Understood. Please be careful, Satomi-kun! Now, professor... This way,

please.”

Harumi took over for Shizuka and guided the professor to safety with the help of the Sun Rangers.

“Satomi-kun, are you okay?”

As Koutarou sailed through the air, Maki flew up next to him with a worried look.

“It hurt, but I’m fine. Could you take a look at my back and see if my armor’s busted, though?”

Seeing the genuinely worried look on Maki’s face, Koutarou got a little worried too. Maki was currently flying on her staff transformed into a broom and smoothly moved around behind Koutarou in a fashion that completely ignored the laws of aerodynamics.

“It looks okay. Just a little singed.”

Upon seeing Koutarou’s armor, Maki finally looked a little relieved. There was a hole burned in his mantle, but only a scorch mark on the armor itself. Theia confirmed that much for herself via diagnostics on her bracelet and then radioed Kiriha over the comms line.

“Kiriha, what do you make of this?”

“It must be an ambush by the remnants of Vandarion’s faction. It seems we were also set up. They must be after one of us, but they couldn’t single anyone in particular out this way... Instead, they’re just trying to thin our numbers. They likely attacked you over Shizuka because you’re a higher-priority target.”

Theia’s question had been general, but Kiriha gave her a very specific answer. The weapon used—an anti-material beam rifle—indicated the culprit was Vandarion’s faction. But if they’d used a gate to reach the scene quickly, Clan would’ve detected the incoming distortion. There’d been no such readings, indicating the sniper had been lying in wait. The sniper had no way of knowing, however, who exactly of Koutarou’s party would be in pursuit of the professor and the navigation device. It was unlikely that Theia specifically was their target from the outset. Kiriha suspected that Vandarion’s faction was getting strapped in for a drawn-out fight. They’d be satisfied picking off anyone they could.

“Pardomshiha, we’re deploying unmanned crafts around the area. There might be more enemies nearby.”

“As you wish. Clan-sama, please watch over Master and the others. I will keep an eye on the professor.”

After hearing Kiriha’s assessment of the situation, Clan and Ruth both got to work. They each sent out unmanned crafts to survey the area since there was no guarantee there was only one sniper. Clan knew for sure she’d use at least three if she’d been the one to plan this attack... But she didn’t dare say that out loud when Koutarou could hear her.

“So does that mean that this corporation had connections to Vandarion’s faction all along?” Shizuka asked once she was back aboard Theia’s aircraft.

To her, it looked like Vandarion’s faction was trying to hurt Koutarou and company as much as they were trying to help BTE. But something about that didn’t seem quite right.

“It’s hard to imagine that they were helping them from the start, but I think it’s safe to assume they’ve been cooperating since the two vehicles turned around in the city.”

Kiriha felt the same way. If Vandarion’s faction had been working with BTE all along, rescuing Emily and Claire should have been much harder. In fact, there was no sign anyone at all was lending BTE aid until their strange decision to change course. Kiriha believed that Vandarion’s faction had discovered her plan and approached BTE at that point.

“Guess we’ll have to find that sniper before we get our answers...”

Koutarou glanced in the direction the shot had come from. They wouldn’t reach any meaningful conclusions discussing things at this juncture. Capturing the sniper and getting them to talk would be much more productive.

Sanae and Yurika were the first to depart for the sniper’s location. Sanae could detect incoming attacks ahead of time and Yurika’s magic gave her the flexibility to respond to all kinds of situations, making the two of them a great forward team. Yurika had made them both invisible with her magic, and Sanae

was guiding them towards the sniper.

“Hmm... something just doesn’t feel right...” Sanae muttered to herself.

“What is it?” Yurika asked.

“It’s like there are people out here, but not.”

“What does that mean?”

“Um... You know how when you walk through the woods, you step on grass and snap twigs and stuff, right? I don’t detect any human presence around the damaged vegetation.”

It was strange. The beam had come from the forest along the side of the road—where Yurika and Sanae currently were. There was plenty of life in the woods, which Sanae could readily detect with her psychic powers. That normally made it easy enough to find people in forested areas. They left something of a wake, damaging vegetation and scaring animals. Following that wake should lead to an aura trail that Sanae could follow, but there didn’t seem to be any hint of one among the wake in the forest here. That’s what had Sanae so puzzled at the moment.

“Doesn’t that just mean it’s robots like that one time with Green-san?”

“That’s awfully smart for you, Yurika, but you’ve got a good point. Let Koutarou and the others know.”

“Okaaay.”

They’d been through something like this before. Autonomous and remote-controlled weapons didn’t have auras. That had tripped them up back in Folsaria, but they knew better now and pressed onward without raising a fuss over it. Sanae and Yurika were ordinarily rather carefree, but emergencies like this brought out their serious sides. Even they knew there was a time and place for everything.

“Sanae-chan, Yurika-chan! Sorry for keeping you waiting, ho!”

“Ho! How are things looking over here?”

There, the two haniwas descended from above. They were presently having an argument about whether they should call themselves the Fire and Lightning

Knights or the Dog and Cat Knights, but they agreed on one thing above all else—their time in the spotlight wasn't over. That was why they'd shown up here ready and raring to go.

“Either the enemy is *really* good at hiding or it's robots.”

“You can rest easy, ho! We'll protect you no matter the foe, ho!”

“That's right, ho! And knights don't go back on their word, ho!”

“I wonder what's up with them...”

“Who knows? But they seem more fired up than usual, so it's fine, right?”

Sanae and Yurika were oblivious as to why the haniwas were so eager and motivated, but they were grateful for it nonetheless. Karama and Korama had moved out in front of them to act as their shield. Both Sanae and Yurika left themselves wide open when they used their more powerful attacks, so the extra protection was most welcome.

“Energy reaction detected, ho! It's just like Sanae-chan said, ho!”

“There are automated weapons hiding around here, ho!”

The haniwas couldn't pick up on auras as well as Sanae, but they had additional sensors to detect other kinds of energy. That included charging lasers and heat from generators, which told them exactly where the automated weapons were hiding.

“Sense Metal! Modifier: Multi-Target!”

“Thanks, Yurika!”

Sanae smiled and held her hand out in front of her. When she did, the crest on her forehead began glowing purple and Saguratin appeared from thin air. By the time it was in her hand, Yurika had finished her incantation and cast a spell that let her, Sanae, and the two haniwas sense any and all sources of metal around them. That, of course, included the automated weapons.

“All right! Let's beat them before Koutarou and the others get here!”

“It's time for the Flame Knight to make a glorious debut, ho!”

“Cat Knight advancing, ho!”

“I don’t want to lose to them... I’m gonna cast a bunch of spells!”

While the four of them looked like they were having fun, they were all actually quite serious as the nearby sources of metal slowly crept up on them.

“You face the Purple Knight, Higashihongan Sanae!”

Once the metal reactions were in range, Sanae was quick to action. With Saguratin in hand, she repeated a line she’d once heard in a historical play and unleashed an attack. With Saguratin sheathed in her spiritual energy, its range extended several meters past its actual blade.

“Hyah!”

Sanae swung the sword down. It didn’t physically hit anything, but her spiritual energy extending from it acted like a much longer sword. The spiritual energy blade passed right through the trees, cutting an automated weapon hiding behind them in two. It collapsed to the ground, sending small parts everywhere as it fell. But upon seeing it, the haniwas didn’t look happy.

“This was just a decoy, ho!”

As it turned out, Sanae had cut down an Earth-made robot used in ground warfare rather than a Forthorthian automated weapon. It was a fairly simplistic design—a remote-controlled gun mounted on caterpillar tracks—that didn’t even compare to Forthorthian technology. But one modification to the unremarkable machine made it clear how Sanae and the haniwas had made such a mistake: it was equipped with an unnecessarily large engine and capacitor, which made it appear to be a much bigger and dangerous weapon than it really was on most sensors. In short, it was a decoy meant to conceal the real deal.

“Attack incoming, ho!”

There were several high-energy reactions around Sanae and the others, but it was impossible to tell which one would actually fire. Most of the reactions were probably decoys too. Among them, however, was at least one real anti-material rifle. And unfortunately, all the decoys were outfitted with laser sights as well. The red dots gave no indication of where the actual gun lay as they all converged on Sanae.

“Sanae-chan, get down!”

“Wah!”

Yurika, who came running up from behind her, tackled Sanae. And it wasn't a moment too soon. As soon as they hit the ground, a laser beam flashed through the air.

“What was that for? You cast that spell on me, remember?”

Sanae was visibly surprised by Yurika's extreme reaction to the situation. Yurika had preemptively cast an illusion to make it look like Sanae was standing several meters away from where she actually was, after all. There was never a chance of the laser hitting her in the first place.

“They don't know that yet! We shouldn't show our hand when we still don't know how many enemies there are!”

Yurika was referencing the basics of magical combat, which prioritized concealing as much about oneself as possible. Giving extra information to the enemy was just giving them more ammunition to attack with. As her master, Nana had talked Yurika's ears off about magical combat strategy. And the same principles that applied to fighting a fellow magician also applied to fighting an unknown opponent. After so many battles, Yurika had learned how to put Nana's training into practice.

“Huh, yeah... I guess you're right. Thanks, Yurika! So should we wait for Koutarou and the others to get here instead of making a move?”

They didn't know how many real enemies they were up against at the moment. Carelessly going on the offensive could get them attacked from several directions at once, which would blow their cover immediately. Waiting for Koutarou and the others would be a much safer bet. Sanae admired heroes and wanted to be one, but she was mature enough now to know when to hold back. After all, with her eighteenth birthday on the horizon, she'd soon be an adult.

“You won't have to wait long, ho!”

“Big Brother's already here, ho!”

Swish!

No sooner than the haniwas announced him, Koutarou landed in front of the girls with Maki and Shizuka following soon after. Theia arrived on the scene too, circling overhead in her fighter.

“What’s the situation?” Koutarou immediately asked.

“The enemy is spread out in a wide area ahead of us, ho!”

“There’s not a lot of them, but they have plenty of decoys, ho! We can’t tell them apart, ho!”

“That sounds like a pain...”

If they retreated now, the enemy would likely pursue them. Even if they tried to flee in Theia’s ship, the anti-material rifle the sniper had was capable of shooting it down. That said, there wasn’t much to be gained from a fight here and now. Koutarou and company couldn’t afford to bombard the entire area just to rout one sniper.

“Why don’t we just get Sanae to pinpoint the sniper and focus on defeating them?”

Koutarou’s plan was to go straight for the threat and eliminate it, but Kiriha saw the flaw in his logic.

“The threat would still remain if the anti-material rifle is being controlled by an automated program.”

Forthorthian artificial intelligence was extremely advanced, so just taking out a weapon’s operator wouldn’t necessarily take out the weapon. The Hazy Moon and Blue Knight were both brilliant examples of just how powerful military-grade AI could be. They were very dangerous weapons even when fully automated.

“Which means that we’ll have to start at one end and just go down the line...”

It would indeed be a pain, yet Koutarou couldn’t see any other way of doing it. They’d probably get shot at several times, but they would surely find the real threat in the process. The only alternative would be to send in automated weapons of their own, but that could be troublesome now from a legal

standpoint. This would have to be up to them.

“That’s not true, Veltlion.”

“Really, Clan?”

“Really. If we attack with an electromagnetic pulse, we should be able to at least stop the decoys.”

Clan had picked up on the fact that the decoys were Earth-made devices, meaning they were considerably less advanced than Forthorthian ones. All Forthorthian technology was designed to be operable in space, meaning it came with additional safeguards that Earth-based technology didn’t—including extra protection from electromagnetism. And Clan saw that as a golden opportunity.

The electromagnetic pulse generator that Clan quickly threw together with what she had on hand was capable of frying circuitry from several dozen meters away. And since the decoys had been scrapped together with only spare parts and spare batteries, they were high-output devices especially vulnerable to such an attack.

“One of the machines is on the move! Expect an incoming attack!”

Kiriha remained vigilant as she kept an eye on the radar, warning the group as soon as danger presented itself. They hadn’t won this fight just yet.

“Master! Looking at the energy readings, it must be one medium-sized mobile weapon with two automated rifles!”

“Ah, so that was their real trap... You’re a lifesaver, Clan.”

“But of course. I expect to hear proper thanks for this later.”

The enemy had laid a three-fold trap. The first phase was using the professor and the navigation device as bait to try to snipe Theia. The second phase was using the Earth-made robots as decoys. And the third phase was the mobile weapon with the rifles. The enemy had limited the mobile weapon to rifles to trick Koutarou and company into thinking they were chasing a human opponent. Then, once they were drawn in, the real attack would be sprung—a surprise assault at full force. An ambush like that would’ve been deadly,

whether it was just Sanae and Yurika or the entire group. Koutarou could feel a cold chill run down his spine when he realized just how meticulous the enemy's plan really was.

All joking aside, I really will have to thank Clan for this later...

The mobile weapon sprang out from cover and attacked as soon as Clan decimated the decoys with her impromptu device. It was a glorious display that even Koutarou felt was worthy of commending.

“These guys are fundamentally different from the enemies we’ve fought so far. If we show any weakness, we might be killed in an instant. We’ll have to be careful...”

Koutarou glared at the approaching mobile weapon. He tensed up for a moment but then focused exclusively on the fight in front of him. He had to. After everything they’d been through, he and the girls couldn’t lose to a single medium-sized mobile weapon with two rifles after seeing through the trap. The fight, as expected, didn’t last long.

Mission Rewards

Sunday, May 15th

It wasn't until after the skirmish with the mobile weapon in the woods that Koutarou and the others got a chance to reconnect with Professor Brown. They'd secured the area and were presently waiting for his family to arrive. And once he got a chance to talk to Koutarou, the professor gave him a small smile.

"You're the man I spoke with at the restaurant, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Satomi Koutarou. Sorry for all the secrecy," Koutarou said with a wry smile and a bow.

He knew, even though the circumstances necessitated it, that he'd been rude and short with the professor. But the professor refused to hear an apology for it and shook his head.

"That goes both ways. We didn't know if we could trust each other yet at the time."

"And what about now?"

"I trust you. Your princess was rather charming, and you're even more knightly than I'd imagined based on her description."

"Oh, you mean this?" Koutarou asked, looking down at his armor. "The design's just her personal taste. There are supposedly far more optimal gear setups, but she won't hear of it."

"Women can be pretty fussy over appearances, after all."

The professor sighed with a shrug. His wife had always been like that. Every anniversary, they'd have a small party together and she'd go out of her way to make sure every little detail was arranged perfectly.

"But that's just a sign of her love for you, you know? This is how she sees you."

“Yeah, I don’t really get it...”

“Hahaha! You will one day. I didn’t myself until very recently.”

The anniversary parties were important to his wife, but Professor Brown knew they weren’t as important as what they represented—their love. Granted, he didn’t want to upset his wife by saying that, so he simply kept his opinion to himself. And in a very similar sense, that was the professor’s own way of showing his love. He felt that Koutarou putting up with Theia’s choice of armor was more or less the same thing. It would be better if Koutarou could just accept that and enjoy it, but he was still young. He had time yet to learn that for himself.

“When you have children of your own and you get to see the love grow every day, it’ll all make sense.”

“Is that why you were so desperate?”

“As exhausting as it was, yes.”

“Hahaha... Well, professor, it seems your family’s here now.”

No sooner than Koutarou said something, a car pulled up to the area where they were waiting. It was the large van that the Sun Rangers used and it was carrying several people inside, including the professor’s family.

“Claire! Emily!”

Upon spotting his wife and daughter as they emerged from the van, the professor took off running like nothing else mattered. His gait was tired and awkward, but he ran as fast as his weary legs would carry him to his family without a care in the world for how he looked.

“To think someone so careful and upright would end up in this kind of situation... At least everything’s okay now.”

Claire and Emily started running as soon as they saw the professor too, and the family of three was reunited in one big embrace. There were no words exchanged between them, just hugs, kisses, and tears. Seeing it, Koutarou couldn’t help feeling a little jealous.

“Koutarou, do you have a moment?”

It was there that Kiriha walked up. She'd been in the van with Emily and Claire, essentially acting as a bodyguard. Clan and Ruth were with them as well.

"I don't mind. We just got our happy ending... So, how did it go?"

"They escaped. The only men we managed to capture were from BTE security."

"Sanae couldn't catch them either?"

"I'm afraid not. Apparently the traces of their auras went cold too quickly, and the cave system they escaped into was too vast. We had to give up."

Kiriha reported on the pursuit of Vandarion's faction. The best way to figure out what was going on would be to capture one of their soldiers, which was why Kiriha had sent Sanae and Maki—both experts in tracking people—after them. The chase, however, hadn't yielded any results. It was practically unthinkable considering Sanae and Maki's combined powers.

"Sanae-sama said the way the trail disappeared was similar to the way the haniwas do," Ruth reported.

"What? D-Does that mean..." Koutarou stammered.

"Spiritual energy technology, yes. They likely used Class II Stealth Mode," Kiriha replied.

The haniwas were equipped with a stealth function that had both a standard and advanced mode. The advanced mode—Class II—reduced spiritual energy output to practically nothing and effectively made them undetectable. That was what Sanae was referring to when she said the trail disappeared like the haniwas', which was what had tipped Kiriha and Koutarou off that spiritual energy technology was involved. That would explain why Sanae and Maki hadn't been able to catch their targets.

"You don't think they've come into contact with People of the Earth and stolen their technology, do you?!" Koutarou gasped.

"No, that's not very likely. If they had, Sanae would have lost track of them much sooner. Whatever they're using didn't perfectly conceal their trail. Sanae only lost track of it because the cave system was too complex," Kiriha

explained.

“So you think they have an inferior version of it or something?”

“I do. I expect they got their hands on it much the same way the Sun Rangers did.”

Sanae hadn't managed to find her targets, but it wasn't because she couldn't track their auras. Even without that, Maki still had their footprints to go off of. The real problem was that the targets escaped into a cave system composed of winding, interconnected tunnels. Sanae and Maki had simply lost track of them. And once they realized that much, they gave up on their pursuit and returned to the group. It was smarter than wasting any more time and energy on a fruitless chase.

But as Kiriha had pointed out, if Vandarion's faction had really gotten their hands on the People of the Earth's technology, Sanae would've lost track of them much sooner. When the haniwas were in Class II Stealth Mode, she could only see them when she was in extremely close proximity. That was just how good the People of the Earth's spiritual technology was these days. So whatever Vandarion's faction had their hands on—it wasn't that. The Sun Rangers had pieced together bits of spiritual energy technology by reverse engineering parts they'd recovered from underground dwellers that came to the surface decades ago as part of the dismantlement movement. Kiriha believed that Vandarion's faction had done something similar.

“Still, I can't help but wonder where they got their hands on it...” Koutarou sighed.

“I don't know, but the important takeaway for now is that they do indeed have it,” Kiriha replied.

“Maybe this was their real goal for today...” Clan mumbled.

She'd stayed out of the conversation so far, silently listening in from the sidelines. But now that she did speak up, her voice and expression were both profoundly serious.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“Even if Vandarion's faction has somehow managed to get their hands on old

People of the Earth technology, they still wouldn't use it right away in an important mission, would they?"

"That's true. If it turned out to be ineffective, that could be fatal for them."

"Precisely. So they'd test it out on a smaller scale first. I bet that's when they caught on to our plan."

"You're saying they just casually helped BTE to test out their new toys?!"

"I think so. I think that's why it was such a small force and they specifically used the new technology to escape. They had to have investigated that cave system ahead of time, and it was a perfect testing ground. It would still be easy enough for them to escape if the tech failed. In fact, thinking about it, testing the People of the Earth tech was the only reason they sent people at all."

"Now that you mention it, that's true... The whole operation could've been unmanned otherwise."

Koutarou could understand what Clan was saying. The enemy's plan was just too peculiar. Their goal today clearly hadn't been to do any real damage to Koutarou and company, though that would have been a nice bonus. But their real fighting force consisted of automated weapons; there was no need to bring soldiers to the mission grounds at all. So why had they done it? Clan's theory seemed sound. They were testing out their new technology on a small scale before deploying it in a serious operation.

"So all in all, they were a step ahead of us this time. We'll have to be more vigilant in the future."

Kiriha crossed her arms with a serious look on her face, a rare showing for someone always so cool and confident.

"Our enemy is formidable, Kiriha-san. This might be even harder than fighting Vandarion himself."

"That's true. Vandarion's ways were despicable, but he was a relatively straightforward opponent. Our enemy this time is more prudent. They may not attack openly like Vandarion did, but the real damage could be far worse by the time we realize it."

When Koutarou returned to Earth, the fight at hand changed. Unlike the clear and ever-present enemy they'd fought in Forthorthe, this one was slippery and hard to find. Moreover, Koutarou had more to protect here at home. It wasn't just the military at stake. A loss here could mean destroying the future between Earth and Forthorthe. The battle was already a tense one, but the gauge on the pressure pot was steadily rising.

By the time Koutarou and company returned to school, the sports festival was long over. They'd all ended up bowing out from the obstacle marathon, cutting their last sports festival as high school students short.

Everybody had known what they were signing up for, so nobody voiced a complaint... But that didn't mean they weren't at least a little sad about it. Maki and Clan, who were only participating in the marathon for the first time, were especially heartbroken.

"Cheer up, you two," Koutarou offered to console them.

"In the end, I didn't even get to finish..."

"Wh-Who cares about a stupid marathon anyway? I certainly don't!"

Maki was honest about her feelings while Clan was as stubborn as ever. They were saying the opposite things, but Koutarou knew they felt the same way deep down. He'd watched them both diligently—Maki openly and Clan secretly—train for the race in anticipation. Having to miss out on it was a shame, and Koutarou felt like he had to do something about that.

"Aika-san, why don't we all sign up for another marathon or a triathlon or something?"

"Really?!"

"You betcha. I'd be happy to do it if that'd cheer you up some."

"Thank you, Satomi-kun! I'd love to!"

Maki was exalted at Koutarou's suggestion. Clan, however? Not so much.

"..."

She was staring at Koutarou, her mouth gaping like she was trying to say

something. But in the end, no words came. She was completely silent. Seeing this, Koutarou called out to her instead.

“What about you, Clan?”

“L-Like I said, I’m not interested in marathons.”

Clan reflexively responded in the usual fashion, but instantly felt the sting of regret. It was a shame that all of her training for this day would go to waste. She really had wanted to participate with everyone.

How bullheaded can you be? But... I still owe her for today.

Koutarou had known Clan for a long time now. He had a pretty good idea of how her mind worked, and moreover, he felt like he owed her a favor. So he held back the urge to tease her for now. Instead...

“Let me rephrase: You just shut up and come along.”

“...”

Clan’s cheeks turned bright red when she heard that, though her expression relaxed. Her relief and joy were fighting her inner stubbornness. She didn’t want to let her happiness show, but she couldn’t help the color of her cheeks.

“What are you blushing for all of a sudden?”

“I-It’s nothing!”

Koutarou had understood what Clan really wanted, and he didn’t even give her a hard time about it this time. That made Clan happy—so happy she felt like she could break out into a dance. She was almost as overjoyed as that time Koutarou had bought her cute exercise clothes as a gift. But alas, obstinate Clan didn’t dare let it show. Not here with so many people around.

“Good for you, Clan-san.”

“There’s nothing good about this!”

Little did Clan know her secret wasn’t much of a secret. The eight friends she had standing around her already knew what kind of a girl she was. But because they considered her a good friend, they pretended not to notice. Instead, they happily watched over her. The warmth she received was second only to the

coldness a certain someone else was receiving right about now...

“C-Calm down, Kotori!”

“Then give me a real answer, Nii-san!”

“Enough, Kotori! That stick *hurts*!”

The moment Kotori laid eyes on Kenji, she was at his throat. Sensing real danger, Nalfa clung to her friend to try to stop her, ignoring the safety of her precious camera. But try as she might, not even sweet Nalfa could abate Kotori’s fury.

Kotori and Nalfa had done well for themselves in the marathon but failed to place. The last obstacle was the traditional scavenger hunt, where the girls had drawn “the person I respect” and “glasses.” The first people to pop into both of their minds were Koutarou and Kenji. Figuring the boys would arrive at the obstacle eventually, Kotori and Nalfa hung around for a while. Koutarou and Kenji were nowhere to be seen, however, no matter how long the girls waited. They eventually gave up and went to find their homeroom teacher and a different friend instead. But now that she had him in front of her, Kotori demanded an explanation from her brother, who had ultimately cost her the race.

“Nii-san, is it true that you ran off with that transfer student in the middle of the marathon?!”

Kotori had heard people talking. There was a restroom between the sixth and seventh obstacles, and Kenji and Emily had disappeared there. It sent rumors spreading like wildfire.

“But there’s a good reason for that!”

“What good reason could there possibly be for that?!”

“I told you before that I was helping Kou, right? That’s why I had to sneak Emily-chan out of the race!”

“Is that true, Kou-niisan?!”

Kotori turned her deadly glare on Koutarou. And even he, the Blue Knight who backed down before no enemy, flinched a little.

“Y-Yeah. The truth is that Aika-san and I were disguised as Mackenzie and Emily-san back there... We’re the ones who ran off at the bathrooms. Mackenzie and Emily-san were already gone.”

So far, the only thing they’d told Kotori was that Kenji was helping Koutarou out with something. They hadn’t wanted to drag her and Nalfa into it. But considering the situation, Koutarou now decided it would be best to let them in on what had happened.

“Listen. Emily-san was being used as a hostage to keep her dad in line, so we were in a really tight spot...”

Once Koutarou finished explaining, Kotori’s fury died down. Her brother had acted nobly in order to save the professor’s daughter... so the rumors were only half true. Kotori could forgive him for that. It wasn’t like she *wanted* to be mad at Kenji.

“I’m sorry, Nii-san. I lost my temper a bit there...”

“I’m just glad you understand, Kotori. It was my fault for not filling you in sooner.”

With Kotori calmed down, Kenji could finally relax a little too. Kotori had high standards, and ever since enrolling at Harukaze High with her brother... there had been several such, well, discrepancies. Kenji had managed to survive this misunderstanding, at least. He was safe for the day.

“Kenji-kun!”

There, a teacher came running over from the faculty office. It was one of the new teachers, Matsuzaka Kenichi, who Kenji had been shocked to learn was actually a government secret agent. He’d been in on the rescue operation for the day.

“What is it, Matsuzaka-sensei?”

“I took Emily-san to her family and she asked me to deliver a message to you. She said, ‘I’m looking forward to you keeping your promise next week.’ Lucky you, huh? Well, I’ve done my duty, so I’ll see you at school the day after tomorrow!”

Kenichi gave Kenji a big smile and stout nod before turning to go. He then walked off with light, bounding steps and was out of sight before too long.

“Oooh, Nii-saaan...”

“Urk!”

It seemed the proclamation of Kenji’s safety had come too soon. He wasn’t out of the woods yet. Kotori had only just calmed down, and there was still plenty of fire left smoldering under the surface. If looks could kill, Kenji would have been dead on the spot.

“Calm down, Kotori, okay?!”

Kenji slowly backed away, trying his best to calm his sister.

“I trusted you... and I was stupid for it!”

“Resist, Kotori!”

Nalfa too was trying to soothe Kotori, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Kotori inched closer to Kenji, dragging Nalfa with her every step of the way. Once Kenji realized that there would be no appeasing Kotori a second time, he made his escape at lightning speed.

“You’re not getting away!”

Of course, Kotori immediately gave chase. The two siblings ran at unbelievable speeds. No one would’ve known they’d already run a marathon today.

“Mackenzie, you really need to work on your timing... Even if you wanted to invite Emily-san on a date, there was no reason to do it today of all days.”

“Help me, Kou!”

“Sorry, Kenji. I’m on Kin-chan’s side this time.”

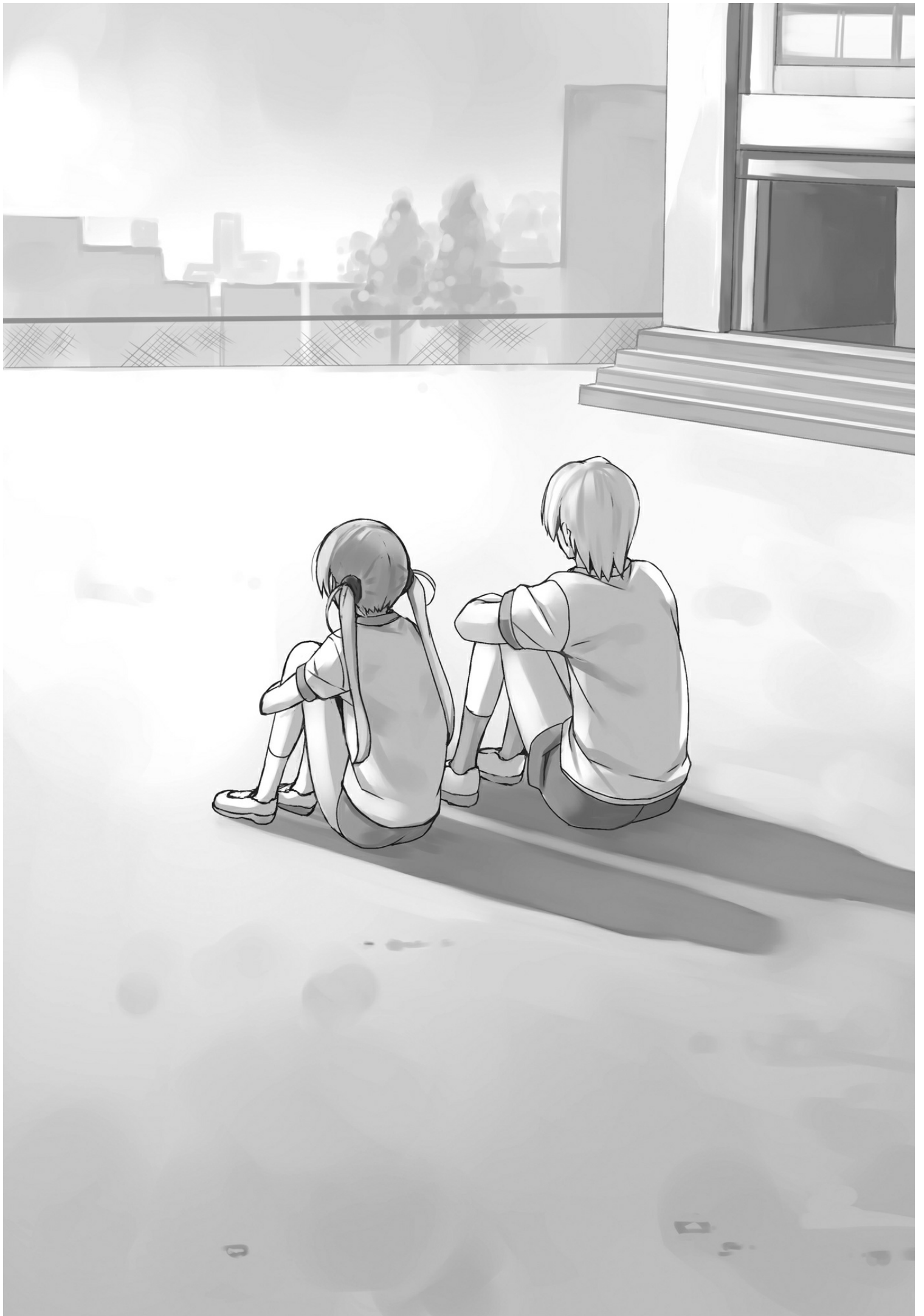
“You idiot! I helped you out, didn’t I?!”

“Hey, who’s the idiot here?”

The Matsudaira siblings tore across the campus, quickly leaving Koutarou’s line of sight. Considering the difference in fitness between them, Kotori normally wouldn’t stand a chance of catching her brother. But today there was

something extra driving her. Seeing that Kenji's days were numbered, Koutarou folded his hands and said a little prayer for his best friend.

Kenji's attempted escape lasted 3 minutes and 28 seconds. After that, Kotori spent the next ten minutes lecturing him. And once he was finally free, Kenji slumped down on the ground. He was mentally and physically exhausted. The only silver lining in all of this was that there was a cute girl sitting next to him who was equally exhausted.



“Nijino-san, is this what people mean when they say no good deed goes unpunished?”

“I’m used to it. Things are always like this for me...”

Kenji’s unlucky compatriot was none other than Yurika, the magical girl of love and courage who’d contributed a great deal to the rescue of the Brown family. But despite her good work as a magical girl, she was about to lose her part-time job at the glass factory. It was no one’s fault, really. But that didn’t make her feel better about it. She was perfectly content to sit moping with Kenji.

“What even is justice...?”

“Justice? I’m still trying to figure out love. I don’t get it anymore...”

Yurika and Kenji stared into the evening sky together, the orange light of the setting sun stinging their eyes a lot more than usual. But as they sat and stared into that dazzling vista, someone called out to Yurika.

“Yurika, Yurika!”

“...Hmm? Sanae-chan?”

Yurika turned her head, but both her tone and her eyes betrayed her absolute lack of energy. She couldn’t even muster the strength in her limbs to get up if she wanted to. She looked like a puppet without a puppeteer.

“Koutarou made some phone calls so your workplace wouldn’t get shut down! He even said that he’d give you some spending money because of how hard you worked today!”

“Really?! I always knew Satomi-san was a good person! I knew it the moment I met him!”

The instant Yurika heard the good news from Sanae, life returned to her. Her expression brightened in the blink of an eye, and she leaped up from the ground before practically skipping over to Sanae.

“What? So it’s just me, then?”

In the end, Kenji was left alone. He stayed there sitting outside the school

until dark, but no one came to get him.

Koutarou had defeated Lord Marswell Daora Vandarion in Forthorthe, and it was his nephew—Lord Ralgwin Vester Vandarion—that was now causing problems on Earth. He had taken up the role of leading the remnants of Vandarion’s faction, vowing to take revenge for his fallen uncle and finish what he’d started. In other words, his goal was to eliminate the Blue Knight and take over Forthorthe.

“Ralgwin-sama, it appears that they’ve managed to elude their pursuers.”

“Then it seems the stealth capability of this aura device of yours is good enough to ensure escape so long as there’s a path.”

Ralgwin and his flunkies were currently on Earth to try to find out the secrets of Koutarou’s strength, and that included the strengths of his allies. Ralgwin was convinced they were the reason for Vandarion’s defeat, so he was ready to dig in on Earth until he got to the bottom of it. Without a way to fight against the powers the Blue Knight had, defeating him would be a pipe dream. And if Ralgwin could get his hands on the Blue Knight’s powers, that would be all the better for conquering Forthorthe. That was why, at present, all of his resources were invested in figuring out exactly what those powers were.

“Well? Do you believe us now?”

Ralgwin and his men were holed up in a secret base in Kisshouharukaze City. It was made in a Forthorthian style, as were their matching uniforms. That made the one man standing among them in a business suit stick out like a sore thumb. But this man was notable for more than just his suit—he was the one who’d brought spiritual energy technology to Ralgwin.

“Yes, you’ve proven your point. I believe we’ll both be able to see profit from this.”

“I’m grateful we were able to come to a mutual understanding. You see, when no one believes in the technology, it’s hard to make advancements.”

“I see now. If no one believes in it, how *would* research progress? I suppose people will just have to learn the hard way like we did.”

The man in the business suit was from the dismantlement faction of the People of the Earth, and he was singlehandedly responsible for supplying Vandarion's faction with spiritual energy technology now. He was an imprudent man who was using this opportunity to improve his struggling financial situation.

But because of how advanced spiritual energy technology was and how different it was from anything people had ever seen before, analysis and research on it were slow going. Unlike the Sun Rangers who had the advantage of being a government-sponsored organization, banks and investors treated this man like some kind of con artist with a scam rather than a visionary with breakthrough technology. Because of that, his supply of it had simply been collecting dust in a warehouse without a buyer. That was, until the day he met Ralgwin.

"But I'm still confused... How did you find me, Ralgwin-sama?"

"That part was simple. We threw an automated reconnaissance craft—what you'd call a drone—in with the fragments that you collected from the spaceship."

That was really what had happened to the missing parts. Ralgwin had blown up one of his ships to discover Earthlings willing to cross a dangerous bridge in order to get their hands on Forthorthian technology. By including tracking devices in with the parts, they could easily locate them later. But not everyone was a suitable mark. There was no point in making contact with careless or poor people, for example.

Those tracking devices—the reconnaissance crafts—were also how Ralgwin had gotten information on Bell-Tesla Electronics. BTE, however, was just careless enough that he hadn't bothered contacting them at first. It wasn't until they were on a course to connect with Koutarou and the others that he'd thought they might be useful pawns. As for the rest, it was exactly as Kiriha and Clan suspected.

"And that's how we arrived at you."

"So you weren't after this technology from the start?"

"That was just fortunate happenstance. At best we were hoping to track that

kind of information down in the future. We never imagined we'd happen upon it with our eighth contact. Our primary focus for the time being was simply to establish a solid foundation to build upon."

Ralgwin was prepared to play the long game when it came to discovering the true nature of Koutarou's powers. He was going up against a legendary knight and his allies, after all. But he was also shorthanded on supplies now that he'd been cut off from Forthorthe. So in order to amass resources and intelligence, Ralgwin was preparing himself for the long haul. He never dreamed that he'd hit such a big lead almost immediately. He'd thought this would be years down the road.

"...I'm relieved to hear that."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Just as you were evaluating us, we were evaluating you. And from what I hear, you're exactly the kind of trading partner we're looking for. You could say your views align with ours."

"You're a shrewd man. But... I can't say I disapprove. If we're going to tread dangerous ground together, we can't have one another being a hindrance. You have a right to evaluate us as well."

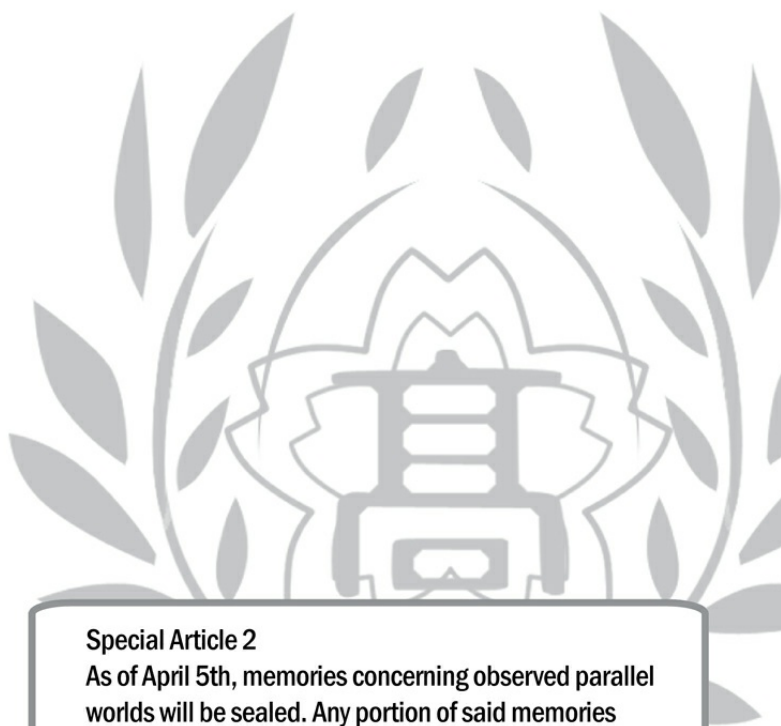
Ralgwin appeared to be quite pleased over such a serendipitous development. Despite hearing that his new contact had also put him under a microscope and scrutinized him, he showed no sign of hostility. Pride wasn't going to get him anywhere, and he knew that. Ralgwin was the kind of calm man who would do whatever it took to win.

"My, my... I must say, you're a rather frightening man. This is almost like striking a deal with the devil himself."

"Hahaha, don't worry. I promise you I have far more to offer than the devil. As long as you live up to our expectations, that is."

And so Ralgwin continued to grow his network on Earth without Koutarou and the girls being any the wiser. The battle was quietly unfolding under their noses, and they would be at a serious disadvantage if things continued like this. Just as Koutarou feared, the fight had changed. This was the kind of battle where

everything could be over before he even knew what was happening.



Special Article 2

As of April 5th, memories concerning observed parallel worlds will be sealed. Any portion of said memories deemed "special," however, may be remembered as a dream. Such dreams will be distributed with discretion at a time deemed appropriate, so as not to arouse suspicion regarding their origin and meaning.

Special Article 2 Postscript

Don't you want to remember something of the world you saw? Well said, Shizuka! I fully agree! We get to keep one special memory, huh...? Is something the matter? No, I think that's just fine.



Corona Convention

New! April 5th, 2011

Afterword

Long time no see. Takehaya here. This was *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* volume 32. I hope you all enjoyed it.

(Warning: Everything from here on contains spoilers for this volume and the next.)

This year marks *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?*'s tenth anniversary. In celebration of that, BOOK☆WALKER hosted a popularity poll for the main girls of the series, the winner of which will be the heroine of the drama CD shipped with the special edition of volume 33. Now, I know some of you will say that all the girls are heroines, but the winner in particular will get the spotlight and a special story revolving around her. That said, Alaia and Harumi already had their special episodes in volume 31 and the corresponding drama CD, so volume 33 won't be about either of them even if they rank first in the poll. The honor will instead be passed on to second or third place.

The winner, however, was none other than Maki! Exceeding my expectations, she held a firm lead from start to finish. As such, Maki will be the featured character in the next volume. I believe Maki's voice actress predicted as much on the last drama CD... If you let your guard down just because she's a former enemy, she'll end up sweeping first place. And no joke, that's exactly what happened. I believe it will be a lot of work for Kitou Akari-san, Maki's voice actress, but this is all for the sake of the readers eagerly awaiting it (or, at least, that's my excuse). I'm really looking forward to it myself.

Second place was another surprise—Clan. I thought that votes from the fans of her voice actress, Tamura Yukari-san, might push her up in the rankings... But based on the ratio of voters, that doesn't seem to be the case. Perhaps this is because she and Maki didn't get to team up with Koutarou in the anime and people just want to see and hear more from them? As such, I've decided to include more Clan in the next drama CD too. In addition, Clan will be the next featured character in the "going out with X" series, which I hope will please all

you Clan fans out there.

In third place, with the support of her fans from the anime, was Yurika. Her ditzy act was really pronounced in the anime, and she's been consistently popular since then. I was sure she'd be the big winner after Harumi/Alaia, yet she finished third. I guess that's just like her.

Fourth was Kiriha, who's been in about that slot ever since volume 10. Since she's the smart type, the anime adaptation didn't really do anything for her character, but she's still been consistently popular for six or seven years now. She particularly enjoys the support of you fans from the early days. Perhaps you could say she's the real favorite behind the scenes. I honestly find it surprising, as she doesn't even really have a special power. Maybe giving her that foil Kabutonga card helped her out? (Haha.)

Fifth place goes to Ruth. She ranked below Alaia for a large part of the vote, but her following really picked up at the end, landing her in fifth place. Like Kiriha, she has no special abilities. Instead, she relies on computers and information as her weapons of choice. Perhaps it's because of the importance of information these days, or maybe her deep hatred of beetles is the reason. Granted, I'm sure her unwavering loyalty is a big part of her popularity too.

The rankings after fifth place are all pretty close together. In fact, fifth place only had 1.5 times as many votes as last place. There was no one single character who managed to double anybody else's votes. This tells me that there's no clear favorite; I think it's just up to who readers are feeling that day. I think we got the results we did this time because Alaia and Harumi were off the table and people really do just want to see more of Maki and Clan after switching sides. It's not like people didn't vote for certain characters because they hated them or anything.

And so I'm going to keep treasuring all the girls as I always have. I fear everyone would get angry at me if I didn't. At least, that's what the voting results tell me.

Just the other day on June 6th, Hobby Japan celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a half-a-century festival, and I was there holding an autograph session. It was a very sudden thing, but 48 readers showed up! I would like to thank each

and every one of you who came by. It's always nice to talk to you guys.

Incidentally, I also asked everyone who their favorite character was, and the top two contenders were Yurika and Kiriha. This only supports my theory about Clan and Maki.

For the autograph event, readers were free to bring whichever volume they liked for signing, so I decided to count and see which volume got the most attention. As expected, the most popular was volume 31 (the latest at the time). There were almost as many volume 1s, which also makes sense. But any volume that was a major turning point in the series, like volumes 26 and 29, was also popular. Some people also brought volumes that featured their favorite character, like volumes 10 and 16 for Kiriha or volume 9 for Ruth. And, to my surprise, the side story volumes also had a fan following. So overall, aside from the first and latest volumes, people's favorites vary greatly. A lot like the character poll, actually.

Now, I have some unfortunate news. *Invaders of the Rokujouma?! Hercules!* will be ending, at least for now. There are mainly two reasons for this.

The first is a pacing issue on my part. I've been writing *Hercules!* free of charge up until now. Back when I was doing it alongside other work for the anime, it wasn't really a problem. But as time passed, not enough material was making its way into the volumes... And now it's fifteen volumes' worth of content! Converting that all would take us well past volume 50, meaning it would take six or seven years for us to get through it all. Now, as some of you might have guessed, missing six or seven years' worth of income is a bit of an issue. In short, as I was happily writing away, I really outdid myself.

That brings us to the second problem, which is the workload itself. *Hercules!* is updated every two months, so six times a year total. That's an entire volume's worth of material. In other words, that means I've been writing three volumes of the main story *plus* one *Hercules!* volume per year. So why not just release it as its own volume annually, right? The editorial department and I both asked ourselves this. That way, the problem would be addressed and the readers would still get to enjoy things at the same pace. We're currently considering if it's feasible or not. I wouldn't mind it simply being released as its own volume, or maybe I could squeeze in something new. We're thinking it

over.

However, Hobby Japan is looking to launch a new site, so *Hercules!* might make its return sooner rather than later. That said, keeping up as I have been at the same furious pace will only cause the same problems all over again, so I'll have to come up with a strict schedule for submissions. Anyways, those fifteen volumes of *Hercules!* stories need to be dealt with somehow. A word of warning to the wise for the future: proceeding without a plan can be dangerous!

That's about all for the updates, so let's talk a little about the book now. This volume focuses on what happened to the parts from the ship that self-destructed at the end of volume 30. If the 20 percent or so that were never recovered fall into the wrong hands, terrible things could happen. This storyline covers how the group is handling that issue.

Another highlight is that Yurika has passed the ditz role off (to Nalfa) and simply become a hot mess. How will things work out for her? She'll get her chance to shine in the next main volume, so this might be the last time we see her like this for now.

As those of you who have already read the volume know, our story takes a turn back underground. This volume was about laying the groundwork for that. At the end of the volume, Vandarion's faction manages to secure a foothold there, and our story will follow them accordingly. But you know what that means? Going underground means it's Kiriha's turn to take the stage again too. That said... I don't know if the story will *literally* be underground or not. The next arc will be a battle for the underground people's technology, but whether that takes place above or below the surface will depend on how things unfold as I write. I think it will be underground, but please forgive me if it doesn't pan out that way. (Ha!) However, the volume directly following this one, volume 33, will go back to the "going out with X" series, so the new underground arc will pick back up no sooner than volume 34. That means there will be something of a wait, but since this is our tenth anniversary, I hope you can overlook it.

With so much to say, this afterword ended up quite long. I guess it's time to wrap things up.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone at the editorial

department for their nonstop help; to Poco-san for all the trouble I cause you packing a volume full of new elements; and to all of the readers who've been along for the ride for ten whole years. I would love to keep moving forward to the best of my ability.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 33.

June, 2019

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Clan

When Clan was left to her own devices, her room and her laboratory would get messier and messier. That was why Koutarou took it upon himself to clean up after her—a habit he'd picked up in past Fortthorthe. Back then, Clan was so dedicated to her research that he thought it was the least he could do to help her.

"Say, Clan..."

"Hmm? What is it?"

Today, Clan was analyzing data she'd collected from their most recent battle. She thought a better understanding of the enemy's weapons and defenses would help defeat them in the future. Koutarou moved around her and kept out of her way, talking to her as he tidied up the place.

"It's been a while since I started cleaning for you, right?"

"So it has."

"But now we're back in the present, safe and sound, right?"

"So we are."

"So don't you think it's time to get a cleaning robot or something instead of making me do this?"

In the past, Koutarou had cleaned for Clan out of necessity. He'd continued out of habit after they returned home, but the more he thought about it, the more certain he became that Clan didn't really need his help. Earth already had robotic vacuums and the like, so surely Fortthorthe had advanced housekeeping robots that would be even neater and more thorough than Koutarou was.

Clan didn't answer him, however. All Koutarou heard in reply was the sound of her chair squeaking.

“Hmm?”

Puzzled by this, Koutarou looked over to Clan and found her staring at him wide-eyed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“That’s... um...”

Clan cast her glance downward to avoid eye contact. She had almost reflexively insisted that nothing was wrong, but she swallowed back those words as she stared at the vacuum tube radio on her desk. She then mustered her courage.

“Veltlion, does this mean... you don’t like cleaning for me?” she asked, her eyes fixed on Koutarou.

Clan was clearly flustered, but now Koutarou was too.

“I-It’s not like I hate it or anything... I was just thinking that it would be more convenient for you. A robot would do a better job and wouldn’t distract you...”

While Clan was asking about cleaning, it certainly sounded like there was greater meaning to her question. Koutarou tread lightly and chose his words carefully so as to avoid any misunderstandings, but just speaking was hard. His throat was bone dry.

“Think about everything we’ve been through together,” Clan said. “It’s not like you being here is a distraction or anything. In fact... I don’t think I could focus if...”

“I see...”

“So if you think my room should be cleaner... then... you should come more often. That way, um...”

Clan’s throat was parched too. She normally felt calm and safe around Koutarou, but she was in a tizzy right now trying to convey her feelings to him.

“...Then I guess things are fine the way they are...”

“...Y-Yes, I... I think so too...”

With that, a silence fell over the room. Both Clan and Koutarou blushed

furiously as each other's words spun through their heads. They'd had a meeting of hearts, though in an extremely roundabout way. It was honestly a relief to both of them, but it made them extremely self-conscious at the same time.

Koutarou was the first to break under the silence. Picking up a photo frame lying atop a stack of documents, he called out to Clan.

"B-By the way, Clan, where should I put this?"

"That digital frame holds pictures and videos of my family..."

"I see."

"Why don't we... take a look at it together?"

"Yeah... Sure, let's do that."

They then sat down together to look through photos and recordings of Clan's family. Despite the plentiful silence and awkward moments, it was surprisingly enjoyable.

Side: Theiamillis

Theia was short for her age, and Koutarou had a theory about why.

"Hey, Theia, do you think being such an active girl is the reason you never grew any taller? I think I read something about that in a baseball magazine once..."

"What are you talking about?" Theia asked, leaning in close. She was sensitive about her height.

"Getting too muscular can apparently keep you from growing."

Koutarou wasn't teasing her, however. He was being quite serious. Realizing this, Theia crossed her arms and nodded.

"Hmm... You're suggesting that early muscle development can inhibit bone growth. That doesn't sound too implausible," she mused as she looked down at herself.

Theia was indeed an active girl, and she had quite an impressive build to show for it.

“Hang on, Theia-chan,” interjected Shizuka, who was drinking tea with the two of them. “I hear newer research has debunked that.”

Shizuka loved karate as much as Koutarou loved baseball, so she had an interest in this kind of thing too.

“Really?!” Theia exclaimed eagerly.

“Apparently the same growth hormones that can give you bigger muscles also help your bones grow or something. However, it’s true that repetitious training can damage cartilage and your skeleton,” Shizuka explained.

“I see. So, in other words, you need to moderate your training if you want to grow,” Theia mused as she pantomimed swinging a baseball bat. “I guess I’ll just keep doing what I always do, then.”

“Hmm, yeah, I guess so.”

Theia was naturally competitive and loved sports. So if what Shizuka was saying was true, then she could continue to play whenever she felt like it. Koutarou, however, had a question about all this...

“Do you really want to grow that badly, Theia?”

While he had a hard time admitting it, Koutarou felt that Theia was a splendid princess as she was. He couldn’t imagine that being a little on the short side was a strike against her.

“Well... Stand up, Koutarou.”

“Okay.”

Theia got Koutarou to his feet and then stood next to him. Her face came up to about his chest.

“This is what I’m concerned about.”

“What, exactly...?”

“You’re so dense. Listen, imagine some sort of serious incident happens.”

“Okay...”

“You’re my knight, so you’ll resolve said incident splendidly.”

“I don’t know about that, but sure. I’ll do my best.”

“We’ll make all the headlines, and our picture will spread across the empire... like this,” she said, pulling up a hologram of some old news footage she had saved on her bracelet.

“Oh, so this is what’s bothering you so much.”

“You can only see me from the nose up! It’s humiliating!”

The footage in question showed Theia standing next to Koutarou—and only half of her face was visible. News outlets ate up footage of the princess and her knight, so it always spread far and wide. The idea that the entire nation saw her like this infuriated Theia, which was why she wanted to get taller as fast as possible.

“So let’s go out and play, Koutarou.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m not. I just got some dirt in my eye...”

“Whatever. Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

And so Theia and Koutarou left room 106. Koutarou had certain thoughts about all this, but chose to keep quiet. He thought it would be more knightly just to exercise with Theia as she pleased.

Side: Ruthkania

The haniwas came to see Ruth one day while she was working on redecorating plans for room 106. Nalfa and Kotori had been dropping by a lot lately, meaning that there were now twelve people regularly hanging out at the apartment. To help make the tiny, crowded space seem bigger and more welcoming, Ruth was thinking of changing the curtains and the wallpaper.

“I think a pale, cool color would work great...”

“Ruth-chan, Ruth-chan!”

“We want to ask you something, ho!”

Ruth was staring intently at the curtains as the two haniwas jumped up and down at her feet. When she saw them, Ruth reconsidered her color choices. A warm color would contrast Koutarou’s dark wardrobe nicely—especially when he wore blue.

“What can I help you with?”

As expected of a serious and courteous girl like Ruth, however, she quickly put her thoughts aside and sat down in front of the haniwas to give them her full attention.

“We can’t decide on our titles, ho!”

“We want to hear what our vice captain thinks, ho!”

The group had recently decided that the haniwas would be joining the Satomi knights. It was customary for the knights’ liege to bestow titles upon them, but the haniwas were blessed with a kind lord who let them pick their own. The decision was a weighty one, however, so the haniwas had come to the knightly and knowledgeable Ruth for advice.

“You two were appointed by Princess Theiamillis herself, making you established knights. This gives you a great deal of freedom when it comes to picking your titles.”

“So we’re free to choose what we want, ho?”

“How free, exactly, ho?”

“Well, think about Master. His title is ‘Theiamillis’s Blue Knight,’ which is quite different than most titles.”

“Now that you mention it, ho, everyone always just calls him the Blue Knight... so I’d forgotten about that, ho.”

“Ho! Your title is ‘Guardian Knight,’ isn’t it, Ruth-chan?”

“That’s right. My family title is different from Master’s. It’s simply an appellation describing my role.”

“Ruth-chan’s family has protected Theia-chan’s family for generations, so

they're Guardian Knights, ho!"

"But both titles stand for something important, ho! Big Brother carries Theia-chan's wishes, and Ruth-chan carries her family's legacy, ho!"

"That's right. A knight's title is like their sword—what it signifies is more important than its literal meaning."

"Ho, oh no... So I can't pick 'Lightning Knight' just because it's cool, or 'Cat Knight' because it's cute, ho..."

"It's gotta be deep, ho! We can't pick anything that would embarrass the knights that come after us, ho!"

As the haniwas continued to discuss potential titles, Ruth turned back to the curtains and the design pamphlet she was holding. After a while like this, the haniwas began bouncing up and down to get her attention again.

"Ruth-chan, Ruth-chan! We'd like to ask something for reference, ho!"

"If you could pick a new title for yourself, ho, what would it be?"

"Of course, I'd want to be the Blue Knight's—"

Ruth had an answer, and she'd almost confessed it readily: *the Blue Knight's bride*. Luckily, however, she was able to stop herself before saying too much.

"Er, I'd like to be the Blue Knight's... Right Hand, perhaps?" she eked out with a furious blush.

"Really, ho...? I think you were about to say something else, ho!"

"Tell us, ho! We're dying here, ho!"

"N-No, the Blue Knight's Right Hand would be the perfect title for me! That's what I want!"

Unfortunately for Ruth, it seemed it would be some time yet before she got back to her redecorating plans.









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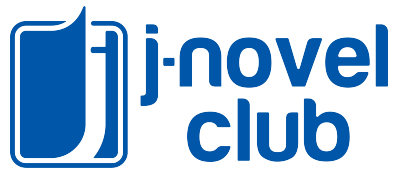
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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 32

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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